



Black

FORBIDDEN FAIRYTALES

EVELYN FLOOD

BRIAR

Evelyn Flood

TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains references to sleeping k!nk (somno) – consensual, s*x while unconscious, s*x while under the influence of a paralytic medication, attempted s*xual assault, childhood abuse (physical/neglect) – referenced but not detailed on page, r*pe of a MMC (historical), use of date r*pe drugs, physical violence, traumatic memories, gaslighting, parental control, fire, PTSD, coercive control, physical attacks, selective uncontrolled mutism, subdrop.

All on page activity is consensual.

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Briar
Evelyn Flood

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Cover by JODIELOCKS DESIGNS

IN LOVING DEDICATION

For every girl who just wants to be adored by three handsome men
who shyly ask to f*ck you while you're sleeping and threaten to
tattoo their names across your neck.

We see you. You little chaos cannon, you.

Briar would like you to know that the above words were only a joke.

*Jenson would like Briar to know that if she doesn't spread like a
good girl, that tattoo is going to look lovely on her perfect little neck.*

BRIAR

“*Absolutely not.*”

Stifling my sigh, I avoid my father’s steely-eyed glare as I duck around the table, packing my sketchbook and tablet into my bag. “You don’t think it’s time? I’m twenty-six years old, Papa. Most people fly the nest well before now.”

Most people have a life that doesn’t revolve around their parent.

“Most people don’t have the... *fragilities*, that you do.”

I press my lips together for a moment before responding. “I’m not as fragile as you think. Not any more.”

Maybe I was, once. But I haven’t been that child for a long time, even if my father insists on keeping me in the same glass box.

“Briar.” His voice is cajoling now. “Look at me, sweetheart.”

Frowning, I glance up. My father is watching me, his head tilted. He’s dressed as he always is, whether it’s the middle of the week or a Saturday morning – ready for another long day in the office. His eyes run over me as if I’m a contract he’s examining for flaws. “I know this hasn’t been easy for you. But you *will* be moving into your own home soon enough. Once things are settled with Philip—,”

“I haven’t said yes to that.”

My words hang in the air between us, adding a sharp edge to our discussion that has my father’s shoulders stiffening. “I thought we

had settled this."

I straighten. May as well toss it all out there now. "No. You thought you had settled this. With Philip. Without any input from me. And if anyone gets a say in their own wedding, it should be the bride-to-be."

Not that I am a bride-to-be. I'm fairly sure that you need to actually be *asked* to qualify. Both of them seem to have skipped that step and moved straight into the prenuptial agreement.

"It's an incredibly advantageous match." My father only shows his irritation in the tapping of his fingers on the marble island in our kitchen, the slight furrow of his graying eyebrows. He assesses me as if looking for weaknesses. For the chink in my armor that will give him the angle he needs to get me to agree. It's a move he's used all my life, both at home and in the courtrooms he spends most of his time in. "He'll look after you. I'm not going to be here forever—,"

"I don't need to be *looked after*." My voice rises along with my frustration. "I'm not a pet!"

My father only sighs. "You know I don't engage with hysterics, Briar. How do you expect to be treated like an adult when you insist on acting like a child? How would you even live, if I wasn't here?"

"I have my own business," I say stonily. "Maybe it's not *law*, but I hardly sit around all day, waiting for someone to take care of me. I would manage. I could manage."

Hell, I want to manage. That's the whole point of this conversation that I can already tell is going absolutely nowhere.

A small scoff slips from him. And it should hurt, but I've heard so many similar noises from him whenever I talk about my work that it only bounces off me. Straightening, I hook my bag over my shoulder and tighten the sash on my sleek black coat. "And it is not acting like a child to want to be part of a discussion that will shape my entire future. Any reasonable person would want the same."

"Any reasonable person would understand that we only have your best interests at heart, and the experience to arrange this properly in a way that is best for you. Not throw a tantrum because they would rather play with fabric in a drafty building than have a comfortable life with a man any other woman would jump to marry."

My temper bursts. "Then let them have him. You're scared, Papa. I know that you lost Maman. But you are not going to lose me – not unless you keep insisting that you know better than I do in every aspect of my damn life!"

I already know I've made a misstep before I see his face shutter. Any mention of my mother will have that effect. His body stiffens, his face turning away. His voice is low as he sets his cup down and stands. "I didn't realize that caring about my daughter's wellbeing was such an unforgivable crime."

And just like that... he's disengaged completely from the point I was trying to make, reaching for his own bag. "If you insist on going to that drafty pit today, Henri will drop you off on the way in."

His driver. Because I have no car of my own, thanks to his paranoia. Another concession I've made, to ease his worry.

And I'm so damn tired of trying to make the same point. "Thank you, but I'll walk."

"Now you're just being petulant. Get in the car. He's outside." He doesn't look at me as he walks past, through the kitchen door and into the marble hall.

I stay where I am, furiously debating in my head while my father puts his coat on and picks up his briefcase. Saying all the things I want to say, the points that sound eloquent in my head but get tangled up and emotional when I try to say them out loud.

"Well?" He's not even looking at me as he holds the door open with one hand and checks his phone with the other. So certain that I'll do as I'm told after a lifetime of bending against his will.

I glance past him to the pouring rain outside. The day is gray and damp, the kind of rain falling that soaks through clothing in seconds and makes you feel as if you'll never be warm again. Henri is shivering already, huddled beneath a black umbrella as he holds the back door of the Jaguar open. It's only the guilt at making him wait any longer than necessary that has me darting past my father without another word.

Henri, more wrinkled and a little more fragile now than he was when I was a child, offers me a polite smile as I duck past him and into the heated, luxurious backseat. "Morning, Miss Everett."

“Morning, Henri.”

Staring out of the window, I wait as my father climbs in and sits opposite me, tugging his paper from his briefcase before he speaks. “Philip is coming for dinner on Friday. His mother will be accompanying him.”

His words are terse. He doesn’t ask for my agreement, or if I have any plans.

He never does.

We both know that I have no plans. No friends. No social life outside of the carefully curated activities my father has chosen over the years – no doubt with input from Philip, to ensure I’m well trained for the moment he decides he’s ready to settle down. We’ve been dancing around this arrangement for years, and all of the polite hints I’ve tried to make have made no difference.

My throat tightens and I nod once, swallowing around the phantom hand wrapped around my neck, threatening to cut off my air.

It’s a familiar sensation. As though I’m slowly suffocating beneath the weight of my father’s influence.

Every day it feels as though I die a little more. There is a little less air. A little less of *me*. The arguments are becoming fewer. The nodding is more frequent.

Briar Rose Everett – the girl who craved adventure, excitement, and love, just like the great stories she read every night before bed – that girl is fading. Buried under expectations, and agreements, and cool, polite civility when discussing something as life-changing as marriage.

She’s dying before she even had a chance to live.

JENSON

I offer a slow, curling smile to the woman sitting opposite me, ignoring the furious scowl of the man at her shoulder. "It's always a pleasure doing business with you. My offer remains open, you know. Should you have any *vacancies*."

It's safe to say that my words will be brushed off.

Alyss Lidell only smirks, tossing her short blond hair back and leaning against her second. Chess glowers at me, his hands clenching as if he's imagining my neck beneath them. "Stop winding him up, Jenson. I won't hold him back if he goes for your throat."

"We have no vacancies." The brown-eyed man on her other side – who is far too fucking pretty to be in our line of work – offers me a polite smile along with his words before he looks back to her. The dark-eyed one next to him nods, the twins on Chess's other side echoing the movement with uncanny precision.

I scan her group with unrestrained curiosity. The six of them are always together, Alyss building her empire around the men who fill her bed. It's a very different approach to that of her father, who held the Hearts before her. Or her brother, who died before he ever had a chance to hold anything at all.

But it works. One woman, and five men. A strong, united front.

"Ask your question." Alyss's smile pulls at her lips. She's completely relaxed here, settling into her role as leader of the Hearts with an ease that I find myself envying. And yet I know that one wrong move will have half a dozen guns pointed in my direction and her knife against my throat before I can do more than blink. "Or whatever thoughts lingering in your head that have you assessing our...arrangement. I think you've earned a question, Jenson."

As I fucking should, given the concessions I've made this evening over the remainder of the Spades territory. Splitting it between the Hearts, the Diamonds, and the Clubs following Gryphon's death two years ago has taken us over a year of careful negotiation that finally completes tonight.

I consider my words carefully, knowing the offer for the gift it is. Glancing around, I check for privacy, although our men have the small meeting room cleared for our discussions. At my shoulder, River has his arms down and relaxed at his side. His body poised to go for a weapon if he needs one, but the twist of his own mouth shows his curiosity. Kai glances down at me, his face expressionless. When I raise an eyebrow in silent question, he nods.

Turning back to Alyss, I slide my eyes up, to the hulking male behind her. Chess stiffens. "My question is for you, actually, Chess."

"Then it's his decision on whether to answer." Alyss's voice holds a thin layer of steel. A warning.

She doesn't fuck around where these men are concerned.

With a nod, I focus on him again. "Does sharing have a negative impact on your own relationships within the group? Is Alyss your only connection, or are the bonds between you just as strong?"

Chess's eyebrows raise in surprise, as do Alyss's. The men behind me stay silent, but I can feel their attention sharpen.

He considers my question for several moments, glancing at the others around him. Buck winks at him, and Chess rolls his eyes before turning back.

"No," he says gruffly. His eyes fall to Alyss, softening before returning to me. "No negative impact. I thought it would, at first. But then, we didn't know each other. We had to work through that

first. The friendships came later, and they are just as strong as the bonds we have with Alyss."

"I *knew* you loved me really."

Buck's quip has Chess sighing. "Most of them, anyway."

He scans us, taking in River and Kai behind me. "I imagine an arrangement like ours might be easier to navigate when a group already... exists. Our group is also larger, which adds more complexity."

But it's Alyss who gives me what I'm looking for. "I don't lead them around by their cocks, if that's what you're asking, Jenson. I'm the leader of the Hearts and that's not going to change, but outside of the work hierarchy, *everyone* has an equal say."

Nodding, I test Alyss's patience by glancing at the male beside Chess. She tenses, and I keep my voice mild, my body relaxed. "I would be interested in your view, Hatter. No pressure, of course."

Hatter doesn't flinch. "They are my family. All of them. They are the family I chose."

What I wouldn't give to know the full details of their story. All I know are small pieces. I know that Alyss took up her role and called in a favor from me to get Hatter back from the psychotic bitch who used to have a stronghold in this city. I also know that while she clearly loves all of the men around her with a viciousness I admire, she has a particular softness where Hatter is concerned, a protectiveness that makes me wonder what lingers inside his head.

"Enough." Alyss's voice is steely. "I trust you learned something?"

I nod my head. "Thank you."

She eyes me curiously, moving to River and Kai. "I find myself interested to meet the woman who could infiltrate *your* group."

I school my expression. "Curiosity, that's all."

Our circumstances are very different.

Alyss clicks her tongue as she gets to her feet. "A word of warning. These things never seem to happen the way you'd expect. Prepare for the unexpected."

Valid advice, but we have precautions in place for that reason. There will be no surprises. "I'll bear that in mind. Staying for a drink?"

The leader of the Hearts shakes her head. "We don't generally enjoy places like this. Although you're doing an excellent job, by all accounts."

Her eyes meet mine. "We do keep an eye on things."

Not a surprise, given their history. The Hearts are more than willing to leave the nightlife of this city to us and focus on their own territory, the vacuum left by Red's demise and the closure of Wonder replaced with something less... *murderous*.

Inclining my head, I glance through the door that River opens, letting the noise spill in. "I appreciate the feedback. River will send the paperwork over with the updated boundary lines, and a copy to Keenan too for his information."

Our Clubs counterpart was busy this evening, apparently. Not that it mattered, this particular issue one for Alyss and I to hash out between us. But curious, all the same.

With a final nod, the self-styled Queen of the Hearts gang vanishes, taking her group with her. The twins that always watch her back nod at us before they follow her through the door and onto the crowded dance floor, where the crowd swallows them up.

River pushes the door closed, settling his back against it and crossing his arms. He smirks. "I thought she was going to stab you when you looked at Hatter. Dangerous game."

My brow quirks. "She likes me. She wouldn't kill me."

Maybe.

I turn to look up at Kai. He glances down and away, his jaw tight. "What?"

A shrug.

"You don't think this is going to work?"

Kai's fingers start moving, the jerking motions a clear sign of his irritation if his words didn't already get that across.

It doesn't matter. You don't want to do this. Not really.

Frowning, I get up and move to the bar in the corner. "I never said that."

I look over my shoulder to his hands as I grab a beer.

*You don't **need** to do this.*

The emphasis is clear as I return to my seat. River drops down opposite me, Kai taking the space between us after a moment's hesitation. "Neither do you. You have women on their knees most nights, begging for a crumb of attention. You think any of them care if you're whispering in their ear?"

His face changes slightly, an old pain in his eyes before it vanishes. *They only want me as a trophy. To say they had me. Not for anything real. When they're done, they leave.*

I know he's tired of it. Kai wants the opposite of what I want, and yet we've found a way to meet in the middle. Even on a temporary basis.

River says nothing, his face contemplative. Then he sighs. "Kai is right."

He's already raising his hands as I glare at him. "*Not* about the trophy part – and seriously, we need to do some work on your self-esteem – but we all have to be on board with this, Jenson, or it won't work."

"It's a simple, temporary arrangement," I say, my voice dry. "We're not bringing someone on forever. I'm fine with it, I assure you."

But if we can't find the right person, it's not going to happen at all.

"Why'd you ask them about their dynamics?" River's brown eyes are darker tonight. He stretches, running a hand over the blond hair he keeps scraped back into a bun. "I was curious too, but you had a point to make there."

I turn the beer over in my hands. "I had my reasons."

Because I won't allow *anyone* to break what we have. Kai, River and I built this club back up from embers and ashes, clawed our way up and used each other as shields against the fucking chaos of the Diamond hierarchy when it nearly collapsed altogether in the aftermath of my father's death.

We fought for this life. The men next to me are *my* family. And I know from bitter experience the damage that a single woman can cause to the closest relationships. Damage it's taken me fifteen long years to fix, and we still bear the scars. I'm not going to make the same mistake as those who came before me.

They are the family I chose.

Hatter's words could be my own. River and Kai are my brothers in all but blood. I turn to Kai, the moody bastard glowering at the floor. "We do this together. That's what we agreed on."

One woman for the three of us. But not just any woman. One who can work with our... *conditions*.

River grins. He's more than up for this. There's not much the fucker hasn't tried, and this unexplored territory has peaked his interest. He waggles his brows at me. "Any new leads? Mallory is skulking around again, you know."

He's clearly joking, but Kai's face mirrors the disgust on my own. "I think she's lost interest. She's moving through the men here like a sushi counter."

Not that we have that many in the first place. Less than a handful.

"They feel sorry for her."

"Like hell they do." No. They enjoy the attention she gives them – any of them, not caring which one - when she doesn't get what she actually wants.

Namely, *me*.

I'm not up for fucking grabs.

"You need to get laid," River mutters. "A-fucking-sap."

Kai signs his agreement, nodding for emphasis. *You don't have to wait for us – for me- to find someone for the arrangement. I'm fine as I am. I've waited this long.*

"Really?" I take a swig, letting the cool beer wash down my throat. "How many times are you fighting tonight?"

I brush his offer off easily. I've never had an issue finding sexual partners, but I've lost my appetite for it completely in recent months. Rope play may sound exciting, but years of staring at pairs of tied hands to make sure they're not trying to touch me, years of fucking in the same position every time so I can't see their faces... I'm tired. Bored, even.

"Four, isn't it?" River cackles when Kai's face tightens. "Do you still fuck your hand in between matches to take the edge off?"

Kai gives him the finger in response. River slips into signing as they bicker, his laughter filling the room, and I lean back in my chair.

I'll admit – to myself, at least – that their idea is... *appealing*. No arguments. No expectations. A clear agreement, with set parameters and a start and finish.

Whoever she is, she'll fit into our limitations and slip right out again when we're done with her, richer in pocket and life experience and with a signed non-disclosure agreement.

Kai gets what he needs. River gets to try something new. And I can get laid without the poisonous thoughts that cloud every experience I've ever had. Without the fear.

It's sounding better by the minute. "We haven't found anyone? Not a single person?"

They both turn to me. Kai gestures. *None that were right. It's not exactly a usual set-up, is it?*

He has a point.

Kai gets to his feet. His hands are already wrapped and ready.

As River and I follow him out to the dancefloor, cutting through the crowd to get to the large room on the other side, River nudges me. "I'm going to see that warehouse tomorrow."

Nodding, I let my mind slip back into work mode. "It's a big expense, River."

But this building wasn't built to house a fighting ring *and* a nightclub. The crowds are growing every day, and while we might nudge the boundaries of what the clipboard warriors call *health and safety*, I'm also not enough of a bastard to risk hundreds of people getting hurt on my watch. We're too limited here, even if the idea of adding more feels like a weight across my shoulders that I can't shake off. "Want me to come?"

"I've got it. I'm meeting Vanessa at two." River claps my shoulder before he heads off to spot Kai, who's already bouncing on his feet. Their heads lean together as River speaks rapidly, Kai nodding before he yanks off his shirt.

Murmurs ring out around me as they always do. Horrified, enraptured mutters as men watch him with envy and women with blatant desire.

Kai was right. Every fucker here wants him in some way – but only as a damn trophy. None of them give a fuck enough to look any

closer.

The savage scarring builds in layers against the skin of his chest, broken only by the celtic tattoos that cover his left side, shoulder, throat and neck. They flex with his movements as he darts forward. I watch as his opponent realizes exactly what's about to happen and visibly shrinks, the smirk creasing my cheeks as Kai's fist lands directly in his face.

His chin. The ribs. Lower.

At least Kai's trying to put on a show for the people who paid to watch him.

It takes less than thirty seconds for the guy to collapse to the mat, face down. Kai doesn't even crack a smile as the crowd erupts. It's not a competition for him. He doesn't need to get in the ring every night, but he enjoys it. And it's a way of blowing off steam so he doesn't erupt.

And he said I needed to get laid.

BRIAR

"Briar?"

I glance back at my father. He's leaning out of the car, the weather thankfully dry today. We've barely spoken since our argument – if you could even call it that – yesterday morning. He picked me up from work with silent disapproval that he kept up throughout dinner, until I excused myself for an early night whilst he went back to the office.

It's becoming a habit.

There's a hesitant smile on his face – a pacifying, small smile. "I don't like being at odds with you."

Then listen to me.

But I don't like it either. My father is all I have. And I'm all that *he* has – a fact I have to keep reminding myself of when it feels like the walls are closing in on me.

He lost my mother. He doesn't want to lose me too.

Papa glances past me, to the doorway. He sighs. "Everything will work out for the best."

It's the closest to an olive branch that he'll get. Nodding, I step back, away from the open door. "Have a good day."

He raises his hand. "I have court today. I might be late home. Henri will come for you at four."

Henri will come when I call him. We've worked out our own arrangement over the years for when my father isn't around. Not responding to my father's words, I turn, hearing the Jag pull away as I search my pocket for the shop keys.

As soon as I'm inside, I can *breathe*.

The familiar scent of fabric fills my lungs, offering its own form of oxygen as I move around, flicking on the lights. The deep green walls are a far cry from the perfect white glitz of our townhouse. Mannequins line the wall to my right, each wearing one of my own designs.

I nod at some of them. "Hey, Flo. Merri."

You really need to stop talking to the inanimate objects, Briar. It's weird.

I also need to stop talking to myself, but I think I'd lose my mind in the silence. After hanging up my coat, I flick on the radio and the coffee machine in the corner – my one true love after my father gifted it to me as a not-so-obvious bribe to go to dinner with Philip – and get to work clearing out my tables. Scraps of fabric are collected and stored, needles carefully placed back in the cushions I keep for that purpose, a variety of shears, chalk and cutters all moved into their correct places.

Busy, busy, very busy.

Until I'm not.

Pursing my lips, I sink down into the comfortable pink chintz armchair, taking a deep gulp of my cooling coffee that hurts my throat and would definitely have my father and Philip frowning for unladylike behavior.

I have no appointments today. Nada. Zero. Zilch. Haven't for a while, in fact.

Nobody wants handmade clothes anymore. Not when the internet offers quicker, cheaper options, delivered to their doorstep ready to wear instead of requiring appointments to get the fit *just* right. Even my regular clients have started slowly vanishing, leaving me reliant on ad-hoc seamstress work to keep the lights on.

It doesn't help that this street is looking more run-down than it ever has.

In the silence, other thoughts begin to creep in. Thoughts that sound just like my father, and Philip, and their indulgent, patronising words.

It's just a hobby. A lovely hobby, but hardly a career, darling.

You can't possibly think this is enough to sustain a living, sweetheart.

Are you ever going to live in the real world, Briar?

Biting down on my lip, I squeeze my eyes closed and try to push them out.

This is all I have. My only opportunity to live my own life. Without this, I'll be completely dependent on my father. And my savings are already depleting faster than I can top them up. My emergency fund – the fund I need to get out on my own - is slipping away.

If the store closes, I have no doubts that I'll be married within months.

I have to find a way to make this work.

I *have* to.

RIVER

Vanessa backs up a few steps, spreading her arms wide. “This place is perfect, don’t you think? Look at those *arches*. Don’t they remind you of Ravenhall?”

I glance up. It does have a feel of our own home – one Vanessa helped us find, and part of the reason we’ve kept her on the books for so long. She’s a vulture, but an excellent realtor.

Her eyes are bright with the fervor of a potential sale. Even her teeth glint at me as she grins widely, her head tilting to the side in silent question.

There’s more than one question there, if I cared to explore it. But aside from the headache fucking our realtor would cause – and the tongue-lashing I’d get from Jenson for fucking up a business relationship, she’s not what I’m looking for.

No. In recent weeks, I’ve found myself absorbed in thoughts of a woman I haven’t even met yet. What started as a basic – if encouraged by copious amounts of bourbon – discussion between Kai and I months ago is now stealing the majority of my spare thoughts.

And I’ve lost my appetite for random fucks. I’m finding myself hungrier for something else. Something a little more on the edge

than I suspect Vanessa would be prepared for, if I even cared to ask her.

Even Jenson and Kai don't realize how obsessed I'm becoming with this plan of ours.

One woman. Three of us. It would be perfect – if only we could *find* her.

I meet a lot of women. Running Mystic, I meet a hell of a lot. Not one of them has been right.

Where are you?

Wherever she is, it's not here.

Dismissing both questions with a shake of my head, I slide my hands into my pockets. "We'll need to consider the asking price carefully. This place needs a substantial amount of work."

Vanessa's smile slips a little. "I think it's a decent price."

"There's always room for negotiation." And whilst we're not tight with our money by any stretch of the imagination, I'm not about to blow extra funds on a shell of a building if I can help it. Jenson, Kai and I have spent too many hours poring over the Diamond accounts, trying to fudge where we could and drive additional revenue where we couldn't, to get into bad habits now.

I turn for the door. "I've seen enough. I'll call you in the week with a decision."

She's still talking. I listen with one ear, mentally running through a new proposal for Mystic to reshape the bar area into something larger, nodding at appropriate intervals.

My arm brushes against the flaking door frame as I push it open for Vanessa to go before me, and I frown at the resistance when I pull away. The tearing sound of my favorite pale gray suit ripping across the sleeve makes me cringe.

For fucks' sake.

"Oh, no!" Vanessa's flapping, getting a little too close for my own comfort, and I brush her off. "Don't worry about it. I'll get it fixed in the city."

Her smile is bright. "You know, there's a great suit shop down at —,"

"I like this one." She quietens at that, and I soften my unintentionally sharp words. "Thanks for the tour. I'll be in touch."

Assessing the damage in the car, I dial Jenson's number before I pull out. This area is quiet, but the roads get busier as I merge onto the highway toward the main city. "I need somewhere that will fix a torn suit sleeve. Know anywhere?"

He snorts with amusement. "Not your favorite suit? How'd you do it?"

I give the sleeve a mournful look. "Rusty nail. That warehouse is a possibility, but we'd need to knock them down substantially for it to be worth it. And take out the fucking lethal weapons stuck in the doors."

He barks a laugh. "Noted. I'll leave it with you. But in answer to your question, no, I don't know anywhere. Kai?"

I wait, tapping my fingers on the wheel.

"Sorry." Jenson still sounds amused. "He's got nothing either. I have a meeting with Keenan this afternoon to look at the territory dispute in Wrensborg. Kai's coming with me."

"I'll be back to manage the evening rush. Dove can cope until then." My bar manager is phenomenal, very small, and absolutely not someone I'd choose to take on in a fight.

As the call cuts out without a goodbye, I take a right. "Love you too, asshole."

An hour later, my patience is fraying by the second as I edge down another tiny fucking street, squinting at the shops.

I found four potentials online. Three of them have closed down, the economic downturn that hit the city hard a few years back still taking its toll despite our efforts to encourage business in our own territory. One left to try.

Come on... come on... there.

And there's a light on.

The small, shabby sign depicting an old-fashioned spinning wheel squeaks in the late afternoon wind as I walk up to it after locking my car. My hand hesitates on the brass door handle.

I *really* like this suit. I worked my ass off to afford it.

Glancing down, I make a snap decision and push the door open. A small bell rings as I glance around.

The place is empty – not a good sign. But there's a comforting air to it that has me relaxing as I take in the layout. Quiet music plays from a radio in the corner, the scent of coffee and something I can't put my finger on lingering in the air.

"Be right with you!"

I turn toward the doorway, my eyebrows raising at the husky, female tone. Before I have time to take a step, she's darting out and smoothing down her sleek blue velvet dress with an anxious, if professional smile as she approaches me. "Hi! Sorry about that. How can I help you?"

Deep, vibrant green eyes sweep over me, catching on my torn sleeve. She winces. "Looking to get that fixed?"

And I... don't say anything.

"Ah. Uh."

Pull yourself together, asshole. "I ripped my sleeve?"

So fucking eloquent. But I'm caught on *her* – on the woman that steps forward, her hand carefully reaching for me. "I should be able to mend that. Mind if I take a closer look?"

Silent, I shake my head. Her hand hovers as she glances up at me, our eyes locking together. She's not much shorter than I am, but her heels add at least a few inches to her height. I pull my gaze away to her heart-shaped face. Perfectly plump, pink lips purse as she looks back down, the shining curtain of black hair falling to hide her face.

Clearing my throat, I lift my sleeve up for her to inspect. "Have at it."

Have at it?

For the first time in fucking years, my cheeks darken with a flush of embarrassment. Thankfully she doesn't notice, lifting my sleeve and turning it to see the tear. "Did you run up against a bear?"

The quiet humor in her voice has my lips twitching. "An angry nail. Not quite as exciting, I'm afraid."

She gifts me with a quick smile that creases her cheeks before resuming her examination. "You mind taking this off so I can get to the underneath?"

Fuck, yes.

She steps back, waiting as my fingers move to the buttons on my jacket, slipping them open. And as I'm watching her, a faint blush of color spreads across the faintly tanned skin of her own cheeks before she looks away.

Beautiful.

"What's your name?" I ask roughly, shrugging out of the jacket. When I turn back, she's eyeing me with slight suspicion.

"Briar." She points to the wall behind her, where it's written in scrawling calligraphy against the green paint.

Briar Rose Designs.

"Briar Rose." I taste the words on my tongue. It's a pretty name. Unusual.

Like *her*.

Swallowing, I hold out the jacket, realizing she's standing there waiting for me with her eyebrows slightly raised. "Uh. Here you go. I'm River."

Her hesitation disappears, replaced by a small smile as she points to the armchair in the corner. "Well, River. It shouldn't take me too long. If you take a seat, I can grab you a coffee?"

My tongue unsticks from the roof of my mouth. "That would be great."

I retreat to the relative protection of the ridiculously pink, frilly chair. When I sink down, my ass disappears into it, my knees nearly hitting my chin as I fold in half. "*Christ—*"

"I'm so sorry." Briar is definitely laughing at me as she turns away, busying herself with draping my jacket over an empty mannequin in the middle of the floor. "It's quite deep. I should have said."

No fucking shit. My ass has disappeared into Narnia.

I sip the ridiculously sweet coffee she makes me without a word, silently watching. Her movements are sure and steady, an ease about them that has me relaxing, despite the loss of my backside to a fictional world. "Have you had this place long? I didn't know you were here."

She glances over her shoulder, sleek dark brows drawing together. "About three years now."

Briar turns away again, and I fight the urge to get jealous over my own damn jacket. "Are you busy?"

Her shoulders stiffen the smallest amount. "I get by."

Something about my question upset her.

"Hey," I lower my voice. "Sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

I'm supposed to be the charming one, for fucks' sake. But all of my thoughts are tangled up in my head. Tangled up with deep green eyes, midnight hair and a small, sweet smile.

She'd be perfect.

The thought slips in, and I shove it away immediately.

Not this girl. She's too – too *prim*. Too perfect. Too sweet for us. It's written all over her, even if it feels like every filthy, depraved thought I've had over the last few weeks was just waiting for her to fill in the blanks.

She slips into those thoughts as if she was meant to be there all along.

I'm going to be thinking about Briar Rose for a long fucking time. It makes the task of finding someone even harder.

Because now they have to measure up to *her*.

She sighs, pulling a pin from the cushion in her wrist and slipping it into the suit to pinch it together. "You really weren't. I'm a bit sensitive. We're quiet, as you might have noticed."

My attention flips completely, from a daze to sharpened concentration. I look around, spotting the dresses on display. They're beautiful, but not the kind of thing you'd wear every day. To a black-tie gala, maybe, or one of the fancy charity dinners we often receive invites to and Jenson declines with a polite note and a donation.

It irritates the hell out of me. Spending obscene amounts of money on a glitzy location, copious amounts of alcohol and tiny trays of food that taste like feet to try and encourage people to spend *more* money on top of that, because otherwise they wouldn't donate at all.

People are *assholes*. Nobody does anything for the sake of being decent.

Briar is watching me, curiosity in her eyes. "Where'd you go?"

I offer her an apologetic smile. "I was... distracted. Looking at your dresses. They're beautiful."

Her mouth twists. "But not sellable, it would seem."

I tap my finger on my knee. Whilst I wouldn't consider myself a fashionista by any fucking stretch of the imagination, I know *style*, and her dresses have it. "People would kill to wear your designs."

Literally, more than likely. Society women don't fuck about with their designers. "Have you done much advertising?"

The color in her face deepens. "Not really. I'm not... I wouldn't know where to start."

I could help you.

"Social media?" I test. "A website?"

She shakes her head, an embarrassed, shaky smile offered before she turns away. Not pushing it any further, I glance around. There's no laptop, no tablet. On the desk beside me, a small phone that belongs back in the early noughties gives me half of an answer. "You don't use much technology, I take it."

"No." Her shoulders relax a little. "My father... he has very clear ideas on the best way to spend my time. That's never included technology. He didn't believe it was something I needed to learn."

Has. Not had. My attention sharpens again, my muscles tensing and my grip tightening on the arm of the chair. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-six. You ask a lot of questions."

My whole body sags in relief. "Insatiable curiosity is my fatal character flaw. There's always time to learn, you know."

She straightens. "You're right. Maybe I will."

"I usually am." My drawled words pull another smile from her, and she crosses to her worktable. "If you need any help, marketing is something I have some experience in. The basics, at least. Enough to get you started."

"You'd do that?" Briar pauses on her way back to the jacket, a needle and thread in her hands as she turns to face me. Uncertainty flickers across her expression. "Why?"

My eyes drop as I debate my response. She's not wearing a wedding ring.

Instead of answering, I give her a question instead. "Have you ever felt that something important just...passed you by? Like you'd missed a moment, or an opportunity, and then it was too late?"

Have you ever felt like this?

Her answer feels important. It feels like it'll dictate my next move. Because if I walk out of here today with my jacket fixed, I'll probably never see her again.

And that feels like the biggest missed opportunity of my whole fucking life.

Briar studies me. She doesn't rush to answer, and I like that.

I like a lot about this girl, and I barely know her.

But I *want* to know her.

Her answer isn't what I expect. It's quiet, and honest, and so fucking sad that I'm halfway to being on my feet before I can stop myself.

"My whole life." She turns back to the jacket, not looking at me as her words hit me directly in the middle of my chest like a dagger to the fucking heart. "Every day of it."

BRIAR

My heartbeat thunders in my ears as I swallow hard, the gray jacket blurring in front of me.

What is wrong with you? No wonder you have no customers.

But he asked. Right after offering to help me advertise a business I'm failing miserably at running.

And in that moment, I felt *seen*.

"Briar?" His voice is a quiet, deep rumble behind me. Just for a moment, I close my eyes and soak it in. Imagine what it would be like to have someone like River to lean on.

Someone who supported me. Someone who sees me as a person instead of an object to be owned, or an opportunity to be bartered. Someone who doesn't constantly dismiss my hopes and dreams as an inconvenience. Someone who doesn't see my personality as optional.

"Hey." I jump as fingers carefully, lightly brush my shoulder before withdrawing. He's already stepping back as I whirl around, giving me space. "I've upset you."

I shake my head. "No. At least – not intentionally. You haven't done anything wrong."

It's hard to argue when my eyes are damp. Sniffing, I take a deep breath. "God, I'm sorry. This is ridiculously unprofessional, but I

promise—,”

“I don’t care about that.” River is still studying me intently, and his gaze is so penetrating that I almost feel naked. His brown eyes are dark enough that they’re almost black; his blond, longer hair tied back in a messy bun that *should* clash with his suit but somehow makes him look even more... perfect. He’s much broader than I am, his white shirt not hiding any of the sleek muscle beneath. It’s glaringly obvious and right in front of my eye-level.

And... he’s wearing *braces*. Tan braces that put thoughts in my head that definitely don’t belong there. I rip my eyes away with effort, very aware that he’s still watching me. Heat suffuses my cheeks. “I need to finish your jacket. You have better things to do than hang around in here, I’m sure.”

Preferably without my hands shaking.

“No rush.” He runs a hand over the golden stubble on his lower face before slipping his hands into his pockets, not looking away. “I can come and get it tomorrow. I actually have some other clothes that probably need looking at, if you have the time.”

My traitorous heart leaps and twists inside my chest. “I... yes, I have time.”

Nothing *but* time. And for him... I would make time.

His smile threatens to unravel my insides. It shows off a dimple, a hint of boyishness that hints at trouble. And it makes my stomach flip. “I’m very glad to hear that.”

It’s only when he steps back that I realise I need to breathe. I suck in air quickly, and River offers me another overwhelming smile before pulling the door open. “Until tomorrow, then, Briar Rose.”

And then he’s gone.

I stare at the door for long minutes after, until my phone buzzes. Dazed, I fumble it in my hands, pressing the screen with shaking fingers.

Change of plans. Dinner moved to tonight. Will collect you at four.

It’s the hard, cold dose of reality I needed.

Even if River comes back tomorrow... this is my life. It’s my father, and Philip, making their plans and expecting me to fold to them like a piece of paper. Insubstantial. Unimportant.

A piece of paper can only fold so many times before it reaches its limit.

I wonder when I'll reach mine.

BRIAR

Dinner is even worse than I thought it would be.

My fingers smooth over the pristine white tablecloth, my thoughts returning to River – again - before a pointed cough pulls my eyes upward.

Philip's mother offers me another tight-lipped smile. When he leans forward to top up her wine glass, and then my father's, she takes a small sip before openly studying me with beady eyes.

I don't miss that Philip avoids my glass completely, setting the bottle down before his arm returns to loop around the back of my chair. Rigid, I glance at my father opposite me.

He at least has the self-awareness not to meet my eyes.

I turn, finding Philip closer than I expected. His smile grows into something that flips my stomach in a completely different way to River. It's... twisted.

"I'd like some more wine."

His brows draw together at my quiet words, and he leans forward. His finger traces up my bare arm. "I think you've had enough for this evening."

Half a glass, if that. Not nearly enough to offer me any kind of escape from his vitriolic mother. Doreen Fitzherbert leans forward,

sniffing in clear disapproval. "It's not becoming for a wife to drink to excess."

It's also not becoming for them to speak unless spoken to. Or to eat more than three bites. Or to breathe, apparently.

I offer her a smile before reaching for the bottle. "Well, I'm not a wife."

Philip's fingers tighten a little on my arm, his voice lowering. Across from me, Doreen wobbles in self-righteous anger. If she had pearls, I have no doubt she'd be clutching them. "Darling, really."

"Hmm?" Pouring myself a generous glass, I offer him the dregs of the bottle. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you want some? I thought you might have had enough. This is the third bottle we've opened, isn't it?"

At my pointed words, color flushes his cheeks, the deep red covering his skin in seconds. He takes a breath, running a hand through his hair before giving me a strained smile. "No, thank you."

"Excellent." Placing the empty bottle back on the table with a slight thud, I sip at my wine silently. Philip leans forward to listen to my father's words on a law case they've been working on, and I scan him.

He and River are night and day, despite them having similar colorings. Philip's limp, meticulously brushed, almost white hair doesn't come close to the burnished gold of River's chaotic bun, and his hazel eyes feel like a weak comparison compared to the dark brown of River's gaze. Especially when they focus on me.

I feel nothing but cold. Waiting, I take another sip of wine, watching the way his lip curls. "Your father and I have been discussing the arrangements for our marriage."

"Ah." Another slow sip before I respond. "You mean the marriage I haven't agreed to? That marriage? Or did I miss one?"

Silence falls across the table.

"*Briar*," my father snaps eventually. His face has darkened to a hue reminiscent of the wine in my glass. "You will not be so rude."

He turns to Doreen and Philip, dismissing me. "I apologize. She's been working too hard – and with her limitations, it's been too much, I fear."

Ah. My non-existent fragilities again. "I haven't had an iron deficiency since I was fourteen, Papa."

A fixable illness has defined my entire adult life, at least in my father's eyes.

They continue as if I haven't spoken, Doreen nodding. "That won't be a problem once she settles in. She won't be working then, not with a house to run."

Stiffening, I straighten in my seat. "I think I'll decide that."

Doreen's smile at my tight words is as sickly sweet as it is mildly threatening. My stomach begins to churn. "Your *husband* will decide if it's appropriate."

"I believe your father is right, sweetheart," Philip murmurs. He brushes back my hair, and I jerk away from him, my face flaming. "It's really not good for you. I'll keep you busy enough."

The insinuation is clear, and I fight the urge to vomit before pushing my chair back, any patience I had vanishing entirely. "Excuse me. I'm not feeling well."

"That'll be the alcohol." Doreen nods sagely, glancing to Philip. "You'll need to keep an eye on that."

"I only had one glass," I snap. Leaning forward, I snatch the rest of my wine from the table, finishing it before Philip can take it away. "Apologies that I can't stay. I'm feeling a little *fragile*. I think I'll retire early. Good night, everyone."

They're already talking before I leave the room, my father offering hurried apologies that I know won't be the last of it.

I make it to my bedroom before pushing the door closed and leaning back against it, my breathing harsh and more choked than I care to consider as I slam my hand over my mouth.

I've never behaved like that before. Never pushed back – certainly not in front of Philip. Papa will be furious.

He should be furious with Philip.

I'd lock my door if I could, but I've never had the luxury. My father insists on treating me as if I've never grown up, even while he plans my damn marriage for me.

Crossing to my dressing table, I sink down onto the velvet stool and stare into the glass. My reflection stares back, paler than usual.

Darkness beneath my eyes is testament to the nights I spend tossing and turning, fighting off nightmares that feel more and more like reality every day.

"I don't want to marry him." My shaky whisper drops into the room.

Nobody is listening.

Nobody ever listens.

And nobody cares.

I'm not the first woman to face an arranged marriage. It's a practice older than time.

Practical. Responsible. Almost expected.

My father's words. He's very clear on how common it is in our circles. Circles that I know hardly anything about, thanks to his unwillingness to let me out of the house. And yet he's willing for me to move into Philip's house and become—

My mirror nearly topples as I jump to my feet, trying to avoid those thoughts. But as I slip into bed, pulling up the covers and burrowing into them, I can't stop them from flooding in

It's the same every night. Shadows of my father, and Philip, and the life I'm expecting to lead. Fractured, broken nightmares of expectation and demand that I know will leave me exhausted tomorrow as I toss and turn.

But tonight... other thoughts creep in. Other dreams.

Warm hands on my bare skin. Gliding down. A male voice, murmuring in my ear. My body heats with every touch as those hands slide down.

More. My back arches, my legs opening, trembling as those hands cover my thighs and push them wider.

Fingers brushing against me. Gentle circles as I twist, silently begging.

And that voice, low and deep, the rumble reaching every part of me. "Come for me, Briar Rose."

When I finally jolt awake, sweat-slicked and gasping, it's River's name on my lips. My mouth feels dry as I shake my head, trying to remember. The covers are kicked off, barely covering my hips as I

press my legs together, trying to reach for that feeling again.
Seconds later, my alarm trills, and I cover my face with a groan.

I'm in so much trouble.

Kai

“What the hell is wrong with him tonight?”

Jenson’s mutter has my shoulder lifting. We both watch River, not bothering to hide our assessment. He wouldn’t notice anyway, not in his current mood.

He’s sitting at a corner table with two newer initiates, rumbles of amusement and barked laughter reaching us where we’re leaning against the far wall. Getting to know the few new recruits we take on, testing them, learning their limits and what makes them tick – as well as break - is part of his role. But River is curiously silent, not paying attention. He takes another swig of beer, his eyes staring out across the dancefloor.

I lift my hands. *Did he say anything to you?*

Jenson shakes his head. “But he’s been acting weird since he came back.”

Maybe they couldn’t fix his jacket?

It’s a stretch, but River loves that fucking suit. It’s a symbol to him. He’s still wearing the trousers, his shirt sleeves pushed up as his elbows rest on the table. He glances up, awareness returning to his gaze as he catches my eye.

My fingers move rapidly. *Get over here.*

For a moment, I think he'll ignore me. His eyes slip to Jenson beside me, his expression tightening before he pushes up from the table and makes his way over to us.

"You called?" His voice is dry, but there's something in his eyes that makes me straighten.

"What's going on?" Jenson doesn't change his position. His arms are crossed, his body loose against the wall and the usual smirk on his lips. Casual, for anyone watching us. But his words are a hard demand, his eyes tight as he sweeps the room. "Spit it out."

He doesn't pull rank on us often. Guess River has him worried.

River forces out a breath. "It's that obvious?"

I roll my eyes. *Just a little.*

"Not here." River nods to the back. "In the meeting room."

Jenson pushes away from the wall at that, his body fluid as he heads through the crowd without looking back. He raises his hand in response to a called greeting but doesn't stop before he pushes the door and disappears.

I wait for River to move before following him. People glance at me, taking in the wraps around my hands and the nasty cut across my bare chest that I picked up in my last fight last night. Asshole didn't feel like playing fair. The shiv he had down his shorts nearly lost him his balls. After I yanked it out.

And I'm itching to do it all again tonight.

I get a variety of looks. Coy invites. Wariness. The gleam of interest that only appears when there's money involved. River leans in to listen to someone who grabs his arm before he shakes them off with an easy smile.

Nobody speaks to me.

Jenson is pouring drinks when I push the door closed. "Sit."

Only if you call me a good boy.

He doesn't crack a smile as he hands me a water. I don't drink before fights. Rarely drink at all, truthfully, aside from the evenings River coaxes me into bad choices.

Jenson doesn't say anything else. We sit there, waiting for River. He glances between us before rubbing a hand over his face. "Fucking hell. You two are worse than my mother."

We care a hell of a lot more than she ever did. Out with it.

He sighs, taking a swig of his drink before answering. "I found her."

It takes me a moment. *Her?*

And then I get it. Beside me, Jenson stiffens, one hand gripping the armrest tightly. "What do you mean, you found *her*? An option, you mean?"

But River shakes his head. "It has to be her."

His voice is almost hoarse. "I met her today. And I can't... fucking hell. I can't get her out of my head. It *has* to be her, Jenson."

His words should make my heart leap. He *found* someone. Someone who might agree to our pretty fucking unorthodox... arrangement. But—

Did you ask her?

River digs his hands into his hair. It looks ruffled as hell, as if he's been doing it all day. "No – of course not. We agreed that we'd do this together. Besides, she's..."

I wait silently.

"What?" Jenson says finally. "She's what?"

He spreads his hands out, almost helplessly. "Sweet. Quiet."

I can fill in the blanks, my fingers already moving. *Not part of this, you mean.*

This world that we live in. With gangs, and fighting, and politics that keep Jenson up at night.

Finally, River shakes his head. "No. Not even a small connection. I doubt she's ever even been to a nightclub."

Jenson sits forward. "Let me get this straight. You met a random girl—"

"Briar," River says quietly. "Briar Rose."

Briar Rose.

Jenson pinches the bridge of his nose, looking like he's trying to restrain himself. "*Fine.* Briar Rose. And she's apparently sweet, and quiet, and presumably has no idea about the fucking underbelly of this city that we live our whole damn lives in. And you think she's about to sign an agreement to fuck *all three of us* – under our fucking conditions?"

I press my lips together, not moving when River glances at me in a silent plea for help. I'm still turning her name over in my head, surprised at how much I like the sound of it.

Briar.

"Come and meet her," River pushes out, his eyes on Jenson. We all know he's the one who'll need convincing. "We don't have to say a damn thing. Just... meet her, alright? I have to pick up my jacket tomorrow."

But Jenson is studying River. "You like this girl."

River likes many girls. All sizes, all shapes. He loves women, and they love him. But there's something new in the way that he says her name.

As if she matters.

And from the expression in Jenson's eyes, he knows it. "This arrangement is temporary, Riv. Remember?"

"I know." River looks resolute. "It's going to be her. You'll come?"

Jenson sits back in his chair, glancing at me. "Your call."

It's not, not really. But I nod.

"Fine." Jenson's jaw is tight as he drains the dregs of his bourbon. "Let's go and meet this girl that has you wound up in fucking knots. Color me curious as to what kind of woman can bring River Huxley to his damn knees."

"Not everyone is Katherine." River's words bounce around the room, the quiet tone steady even as he blows open a box that Jenson keeps locked up tight. "And you are not your father."

"Fucking hell." Jenson stands, but he doesn't look at us. "She's just a girl. Even if she agrees, it's not forever, River."

But it's River's face that I'm watching. And Jenson doesn't see the shadow that crosses it at his words, but I do.

I think we're in trouble.

Jenson's mood goes from bad to worse on the way out. He's making his way to the bar when a woman almost crashes into him, before he deftly ducks out of the way. His whole body stills. "Get away from me, Mal."

Mallory laughs, a little too shrill. It makes me cringe. Over Jenson's shoulder, her eyes meet mine, narrowing into beady slits before they

relax, widening innocently as she backs up, her hands wiggling as if she's taunting him. "C'mon, Jenson. Blow off some of that steam with me."

I can see the tension in his spine a mile away. So can she, a hint of nervousness in her expression that she smooths away. It disappears beneath the heavy layers of make-up. Mal's gone all out tonight, more skin than dress in her latest attempt to hold Jenson's attention. The triangles holding her in place are a bright, toxic-looking green. She even glows under the club lights.

Like toxic waste.

She's fighting a losing battle, but she doesn't give up. I might even feel sorry for her, if she wasn't such a raging bitch.

Beside me, River's words are low. "We need to ban her permanently."

We should have done it months ago, but we've all been distracted with the territory arrangements. *Didn't you ask R to do it?*

His hands fly in response, abrupt with his irritation. *He didn't.*

So she fucked her way out of it, and Rod paid the price. River doesn't take disobeying instructions lightly.

Jenson grips her wrist when she reaches for him again, his voice like ice. "Do not touch me."

She pouts, pulling a strand of blond hair forward and winding her finger around it with a coy look. "We can play rough. If you want to."

"Jesus." He shoves her away. "Have some fucking respect, Mal. The answer is *no*."

When she moves for him again, River darts forward. Mal's cry is audible as he grips her wrist in the same place as Jenson, his hold a lot tighter and his voice a hell of a lot more threatening. "He. Said. *No*."

Jenson almost backs into me, his hands twisting. Setting a hand on his shoulder, I move around him and cross my arms. Mallory glares at me. "The hell is *he* looking at, the f—,"

"Finish that sentence," River cuts her off coolly. "And I will break your wrist, Mallory."

She twists in his grip, but he doesn't let go. "You're banned from upstairs, effective immediately. I see you up there, we have another

problem. Doesn't matter who you get to invite you."

"Fuck you," she snaps. He finally lets her go and she stumbles back, her eyes sliding to the man vibrating with tension behind me. "Jenson!"

I sign to River, and he nods. I feel the cool air behind me as Jenson leaves. "You don't come near him again, Mal. Not in the club. Not on the street. You don't speak to him. You don't put your fucking hands on him again. *Ever*. He's made his feelings clear."

"Then he can tell me himself—,"

"He already fucking has!" River loses what patience he has left. "One more word, and you're banned for life. One fucking *word*."

Her mouth snaps shut. She spends her entire life loitering in Mystic. Fuck knows, it might be kinder to cut her off.

"There's more to life than this place." River's voice is still cool, still angry, even as he faces her.

She laughs then. "You fucking love this place, River. It's in your blood. You don't see anything else."

He does love this place. He built it from the ground up. But she has no idea how wrong she is. River shrugs. "Suit yourself. You've been told. Follow the rules, or you won't set foot in here again."

My phone buzzes in my pocket with a reminder, and I glance over my shoulder before ducking around them. River falls into step beside me as I make my way to the ring, stretching out my arms. "Think she'll listen?"

For her own sake, I hope so. Should we go find him?

River hesitates, glancing over his shoulder as if Jenson will magically appear. "No. Let's give him some space. You're on in five minutes."

I get my aggression out in the ring. I wonder where Jenson will get his out tonight. Not with Mal, or any of the women here.

I get my answer as I duck under the ropes. River swears under his breath, even as the crowd goes fucking *nuts*. I eye up my first opponent as he groans behind me. "I'm not cleaning you both up."

Opposite me, Jenson turns. He's peeled off his shirt and kicked off his shoes, not bothering to change his trousers. He bounces on his

feet, stretching out his neck before he raises an eyebrow in silent question.

This isn't the first time we've done this. I let my anger out in small bursts. He lets his build up until it becomes an inferno.

My smile is a taunt, and he throws his head back with a laugh that breaks through the mask he likes to wear. "Fair warning. I'm not in the mood to fuck around."

Meaning he wants a real fight. *Good.*

I curl my fingers at him. *Come on, then. If you think you can.*

I'm grinning as we listen out for the clock, and then he's launching himself from the corner, his arm drawing back as the crowd around us roars their approval. I meet him in the middle, ducking his first hit before my fist slams into his ribs.

Game fucking on.

BRIAR

My veins are buzzing, either from the caffeine or excitement as I take another sip before setting my coffee down on my work table.

Across the room, River's jacket hangs neatly on the mannequin. Circling it, I brush it off carefully, inspecting the pale fabric just in case I missed anything the first forty-nine times.

Stomach churning, I retreat to my armchair and glance over at the closed door. He didn't say when he was coming today. It could be any second.

"Pull yourself together," I mutter. Glancing at the mannequins, I squint, raising a finger in mock admonishment. "Don't look at me like that, Flo."

I don't need your silent judgment. I'm judging myself enough as it is.

Especially after my... *eventful* night. Inhaling, I slide my hand over my stomach, feeling the flutter of nerves.

I dreamed about him. Worse, I woke up in a sprawling, aching mess, my thighs slick and hair wild, looking as if I'd had exactly the night I only dreamed about.

Exhaustion wars with anticipation as I pace, grateful for once that I don't have any other orders to work on. Even my fingers are

trembling. If I looked in the mirror, my eyes are blatant evidence of too many sleepless nights, the deep blue rings beneath them a seemingly permanent feature.

My father took one look at me this morning and withheld the lecture I expected, only pushing a liquid supplement, already prepared in a glass, across the kitchen island before silently leaving for work.

Falling back into the chair with my arms wide on either side, I stare at the floor, worrying my bottom lip between my teeth.

I wish he had let his anger out. It's only delaying the inevitable showdown we're heading toward over last night. Over all of it. And I'd *welcome* it, welcome an honest discussion on my future and my choices. Because whatever my father wants to think, they are *mine*.

And I'm not marrying Philip Fitzherbert. Not even to please my father. Not even for the sake of a *comfortable life*, as he likes to put it.

My yawn takes me by surprise. I'm so *tired*.

Sighing, I tip my head back and close my eyes for a moment.

Just for a moment.

JENSON

Fighting the urge to press a palm to my aching side, I stride down the sidewalk after River. He took off almost before I could park the fucking car, leaving Kai and I to follow his trail as we head toward the store he visited yesterday and the woman he wants us to meet with a holdall of ripped clothing gripped in his hand.

Ahead of me, Kai raises one eyebrow as he glances over his shoulder and down to my side. A fine cut sits just above his right eye, courtesy of my aching fists.

I scowl at him. "Fuck off. I'm fine."

Any aches and pains are worth it. I slept like a damn baby, the bad memories beaten out of me by Kai and more than a dozen vicious-as-hell rounds. We only quit when River intervened and turned the damn lights off on us.

But they never leave for long. Especially now, with what we're looking to do. Those thoughts try to creep in again, and I shove them away.

She's not Katherine.

This situation is not the same.

I need to give this girl a fair shot. Especially as River doesn't seem inclined to look for anyone else, now that he's found her. Kai's

expression is relaxed enough, but I know him well enough to see the curiosity he's trying to hide.

The desperation.

This is about much more than me.

Suck it up, asshole.

We reach a small, dilapidated storefront, and I rock back on my heels. In front of us, a wooden door that's clearly seen better days has a cheerful looking sign in curly pink writing pinned to it.

Briar Rose Designs.

"This is one of ours, isn't it?" Frowning, I glance down the street. "Did we miss it in the revamp?"

The retailers in our territory hand over small parts of their income for us to keep an eye on things. Not just from a security perspective, but wider. Landlord issues are something we've been battling with for years, but we have a good crop of owners on our roster now. Although the run-down street doesn't fit with the work we've been doing to boost our area.

"Shit." River pauses with his hand outstretched. "I didn't even think about that. I assumed it was Clubs, to be honest. The boundary line is pretty close to here."

He's not overly involved in the wider territory, his focus on Mystic and overseeing the men that work beneath us.

Beside me, Kai is frowning too. *I'll look into it.*

River almost vibrates. "Good. Are we ready?"

I wave a hand, not hiding my smirk. "After you, Captain Obvious."

He doesn't even bite. Just ducks inside the store, Kai and I behind him. A small, tinkling bell announces our arrival, but I nearly walk into River's back. He throws out his hand. "*Shhh*, both of you."

He sounds distracted. Amusement is written across Kai's face when I turn. *Did he just tell me to shut up?*

He has a point, you noisy little shit. My own lips twitch as I duck around a motionless River. "What—,"

My voice trails off.

"Well, fuck." River whispers, echoing my own thoughts. "Think it's a sign?"

I don't say anything.

"Told you." The fucker sounds smug, now. "Didn't I tell you?"

"River," I mutter. "Shut up."

He wisely snaps his mouth closed as I take another step, my head tilting to the side.

A sign indeed. Because Briar Rose is... *sleeping*. Curled up in a hideous excuse for a pink armchair that almost swallows her completely, her cheek pillowed on her arm and masses of dark hair scattered fucking everywhere. A pair of sleek nude heels lay abandoned on the floor, toes delicately painted pink poking out from the edges of her long black dress.

Blinking, I sweep my gaze over her again.

My mouth dries. That fucking *hair*.

It looks like the softest liquid silk, a waterfall of darkness tumbling down. It must reach her waist at least, and a whole new image enters my head—

Swallowing, I yank my gaze away and turn to Kai. "Are you fucking blushing?"

He *is*. His cheeks darken further as he shakes his head, lifting his hands and dropping them again before he shrugs, still watching her.

"So," River murmurs. When I glance to him, he's leaning back against the wall, his expression smug as fuck, but his eyes soft as he stares at her. "You can see it, right?"

Phantom hands threaten to cut off my oxygen at his words. Yes, I can see it. See her, in the middle of the three of us. Underneath me, legs spread, those perfect fucking lips parted—

Fuck – I couldn't have imagined anyone better. If I had a pen and paper and the skill of Michael-fucking-angelo himself, I couldn't have come up with *her*.

Which makes her... dangerous. It's like a bucket of ice-cold water thrown over my head.

"River." My whisper is hoarse.

He straightens at my voice. "I hate it when you use that tone."

I could become obsessed with this girl. Easily.

She could ruin me.

Already I'm cataloguing this room, the lack of security, the way the door was left unbolted while she fucking *sleeps*, as if anyone

couldn't just walk in off the street. Hell knows that she looks like she has the defensive capabilities of a newborn kitten.

I know that when I walk out of here, the first thing I'm going to do is find out who owns this building so I can rip into them, or fucking buy it off them to make it better.

If I get any closer – if she said *yes* – I wouldn't let her go.

I step back. "You were right."

My voice is like gravel. Kai spins to look at me, his eyebrows pulling together as River pales. "She's too sweet. It's fucking obvious that she doesn't fit with us. *No.*"

Only part of that is true.

I need someone we can make a start-and-finish, short-term deal with. Someone I can use and walk away from without looking back. Without caring. It doesn't matter how perfect she is, how much I want to see her in Ravenhall, sprawled and satisfied, dark silk against cream bedding.

It doesn't matter that I *want* to see her face when she climaxes with my cock buried inside her.

That was my input. My request, for good fucking reason.

You haven't even spoken to her. Kai's hands fly with his agitation, his eyes dark. *At least speak to her first.*

I already fucking know how that's going to go.

I'm shaking my head, backing away. But River stalks after me. "She's not Katherine."

"I know that." I snap the words, trying to keep my voice quiet as my hand rakes through my hair. "But Jesus - look at her, River."

For the love of fuck – she has strangers, three of the most dangerous men in the city standing around her, loaded up with weapons and arguing, and she's *still fucking sleeping*.

No defence instinct. How the hell is she still *alive*?

She wouldn't need it if she was ours.

Fuck. I take another step back, and my hand is shaking. "River. Please."

This is what I was afraid of. Nothing – not a single fucking thing in this life – scares me, but the possibility of what's in front of me is enough to have my heart pounding and sweat dotting my brow.

A possibility I can see clear as day, history repeating itself. River's expression shifts into something I've never seen before.

As if he's torn.

As if he's already chosen.

I swing to stare at Kai, and my stomach churns. "You too?"

He meets my gaze, steady and resolute. *She might not even say yes. But you are not your father.*

The divide is clear.

Kai's face softens. *If this is your choice, I will respect it.*

River opens his mouth—

"River?"

At the small, shaky voice, the three of us swing around. My eyes collide with bright, vibrant green, fucking emeralds and sunny fields and holy *fuck*.

As I stare into Briar Roses's wide, perfect fucking eyes, I already know I've lost the fight.

BRIAR

I can feel my eyes widening as I bolt upright. "God, I'm sorry. I didn't even realize—,"

River's hands are already up, placating, even as he glances at the two other men he's with. "Don't worry. We just got here. We were discussing how to... uh... wake you."

How embarrassing.

Despite myself, my gaze returns to the taller one. He's just as handsome as River, with curled brown hair, longer on top and short on the sides, and steel-gray eyes that should be cool, but instead feel like a brand as he watches me. As if he's marking me, somehow.

You probably have drool on your chin.

He looks away, and my face flushes with heat as I scramble out of the chair. I glance at the second male, but he's almost hidden behind River. "I have your jacket ready."

"So I saw." River's smile is crooked, the dimple just as devastating as it was yesterday. God, but he's almost more handsome than I remembered. "It looks perfect. Better than new."

Belatedly, I realize I'm staring, and they're all... staring back. The third man edges out from behind River, his lips tilted upright and his arms crossed. Muscles bulge, and my mouth goes dry as I take in

the ink that curves up his throat. Clearing my throat, I look away. "Right. Let's get you fixed."

My voice is overly bright as I dart to the railing in the corner, tugging off an empty hanger. River is closer than I expected when I turn, and my breath catches. "Oh!"

"Briar," he murmurs, raising one eyebrow at me. "Breathe."

My nod is a little weak. "I'm sorry. It's just—,"

I stop. How can I explain that it feels like they've sucked all of the air out of my studio? All three of them are so... *big*.

"This is Jenson." River indicates the taller man, the one with the steel-gray eyes. He nods, not smiling, but there's an intensity to his gaze that has my blush deepening as I turn to the third male.

"Hi." My smile is shaky. He smiles back at me with ridiculously pretty eyes for such an imposing man. Sapphire blue.

"That's Kai." River deftly steals the hanger from my hands. "He doesn't speak, - not out loud. He signs, though."

The smile wavers on Kai's face, as if he's waiting for my reaction. I lift my hands, but the other man – Jenson – speaks up. "Why didn't you have your door locked?"

At the accusatory words, my back snaps straight. "In case I had a customer. Which, as it happens, I did."

I try to smile, but he frowns at me, gray eyes darkening. "It's not safe. Especially while you're sleeping."

"Jenson." River's smiling, but there's a tension to it that has me glancing between them. "It's her store."

Jenson stares at me for a moment longer. "I know. But it's not particularly safe around here. You have to be careful."

Is he worried about me?

I bite the inside of my cheek. He might have a point. "I didn't mean to fall asleep. I didn't sleep well last night."

"Did you dream of me?" River's teasing words suck the tension from the air and have me blanching. All three men pause as I force an awkward laugh.

"No! Of course not. That would be—,"

"Perfectly acceptable." The low murmur has my head snapping around. There's a slight smile on River's face as he leans in to

inspect his sleeve. "You have magical hands, Briar Rose."

I'm almost tempted to respond with *so do you* and see what he says, but I'm still dazed by his previous words.

Swallowing, I take a step back and press my hands against my burning cheeks.

I'm not going to sleep well tonight either. Not after that comment. And not after finding out there's *three* of them.

River crosses to a cream bag I didn't notice, close to the door. "I brought some of those clothes I mentioned."

Catching movement from the corner of my eye, I turn to look at Kai and Jenson. They're staring at each other, Kai signing as Jenson watches.

My eyes drop to the movement of his fingers, and I frown.

I—

What?

KAI

Jenson shrugs at my question. *No idea.*

Behind us, I hear the low murmur of River's voice. He's buying time.

We did not think this through.

Because how the hell do you broach a conversation like this one?

Did you bring a copy of the agreement?

Jenson raises his eyebrows. *What the fuck do you think?*

But his eyes slip away from me, searching for Briar. I understand his worries, even if I think they're unfounded. But he doesn't seem torn now as his eyes return to me. *We'll need to talk it through, the three of us. We'll come back.*

Now that we've actually found someone. This idea always felt like more of a suggestion than anything else. Until now.

I resist the urge to turn and look for her. We're already overwhelming her. I can see it in her face.

We could always shred our wardrobe like River. I can hear him digging around in the bag now, pulling out all of the *accidental* tears he created this morning with the tip of his knife and a heap of his suits. Jenson and I watched on with confusion and more than a little entertainment.

It doesn't feel so funny now. I get it.

Do you really think this will work? My heart is in my throat as I sign the words. *She doesn't even know us. We're strangers to her. Do you really think she's going to agree to just let us put her to sleep so we can fuck her? Do whatever we want with her?*

It sounds like madness, even as the words form.

The *trust* it would take for someone to agree to our arrangement – and not just one of us, but all of us. To come to our home and make themselves vulnerable on such a basic level. Drug themselves, for our use.

Any sane person would run screaming.

Jenson's eyes lift. I keep signing as I follow his gaze. *She's perfect. But she'd have to be insane to sign up for us—*

"Kai." Jenson's voice is sharp. A warning.

My fingers stutter, the movement stalling.

Because Briar is watching us.

But her eyes aren't on our faces.

They're on my fingers, her face a lot paler than it was a moment ago and her eyebrows drawn into a deep frown.

My heart flips inside my chest, so loud I can hear it. Can she—?

Slowly, I sign. *Can you understand me?*

She sucks in a breath, and my heartbeat becomes louder, drowning out every other sound. I take a step forward.

You can sign.

It's not a question, as her eyes slowly move up. Behind her, River stands, looking between us. And the tension in the room rises until it prickles against my skin as her eyes widen.

"You want to...," Briar pauses. Takes a breath. "Put me to sleep? While you—,"

Her tanned skin flushes a deep shade of scarlet.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

Slowly, her fingers move. She's hesitant, but the sigs are perfectly legible, even as the bottom drops out of my stomach.

You want to have sex with me while I'm unconscious?

"It's been a while." Her voice is steady enough, but her fingers shake as she drops them. "But I'm pretty sure I got the gist."

River and I are frozen in place, the panic in his expression undoubtedly matching my own.

"Asleep." The low, steady voice has all of us looking at Jenson. There's a slight flush to his own face, but he meets Briar's gaze steadily. "And not without your permission."

And not right now, I hastily add. *We're not going to hurt you, or do anything to make you uncomfortable.*

"Semantics," Briar murmurs. She's still pale, and I glance behind her to the chair. "They're the same thing."

Maybe, but asleep sounds a hell of a lot better than unconscious. Especially when she's still staring at us, shell-shocked and trembling. None of us move. I'm not sure River is even breathing.

"Do you want us to leave?" Jenson asks quietly. "We will. Immediately, if you ask us to."

This is it.

In a moment, the power dynamics in this room swing in favor of a still-silent Briar, and she doesn't even realize. Maybe we didn't discuss the exact way we'd ask – not when we didn't know who it would be – but we understand the parameters of this arrangement inside and out. Went over it, over and over again, to make sure this could be something our unknown partner might be comfortable with. To make sure they could put their trust in us and know exactly what that meant.

She holds the power. She has to, in order for this to work. Everything is now on her terms. Everything begins and ends with *her*.

The room is still silent.

"Briar," River says finally. She jolts, as if lost in her own thoughts. Her arms wrap around her waist as she slowly turns. He holds out a hand, his face pleading. "Sit down. Please."

She looks as if she might pass out. Eyeing River's hand warily until he pulls it back, she retreats back to the chair we found her sleeping in when we first arrived.

Her eyes drop down, and I wonder if she's realizing the same thing. "Was that – why? Because you found me like that?"

And fuck, she sounds *scared*.

"No." River looks agonized. As if he can feel her slipping through our fingers. "God, no. We – it's a long story, Briar. But we've been looking for someone for a long time. Someone who might... be interested in an arrangement. A temporary one, with clear limits. Everything would be planned out to make sure you were safe. This isn't a whim."

"Someone." She whispers it as if tasting the word. "And you think I'm that person."

"Only if you wanted to be." Jenson steps up. He may have his own insecurities, but I know he'll allow none of them to show right now. Not when she looks so fragile. "There is no pressure, either way."

She studies her fingers, her face unreadable. "But you... want me to be that person."

He doesn't hesitate. "Yes."

I'm holding my breath. She's wary, and rightfully so.

But she hasn't said *no*.

I wait for her to glance up. Her eyes move straight to me, drop to my hands. *Do you have any questions?*

She takes a deep breath. *I have many, many questions.*

Obviously. But her lip twitches slightly at the corner. The three of us watch, staying back and giving her space as she straightens. "How would it work?"

Fuck.

Hope. It bursts to life inside my chest, as if my ribcage is stretching out and giving my lungs room.

River clears his throat when Jenson glances at him. It's a good choice, given they've already met. Barely, but he has a head start on either of us.

"There is a draft agreement," he says softly. "It sets out everything we could think of, but it's only a draft. It's supposed to be a starting point, and anything you wanted to change, add or remove is up for discussion. The agreement would set out the boundaries for all of us – what you're comfortable with, how we would approach it, the time given – everything."

"Briar." Jenson doesn't moderate his voice, doesn't soften the harshness in his tone. She jerks her gaze to him. "The one thing you

should know is that everything about this – every single thing – is in your control. *Everything.*"

"How...", Her brow wrinkles in confusion. "I don't understand."

Jenson crouches, so they're at an equal eye level. "You don't want something? It's gone. Not going to happen. You want to add something? Done. You're uncomfortable at any time? It stops. Whilst we each have our own boundaries – lines we will not or cannot cross - every single action during this agreement would be yours to dictate."

When she looks at me, I nod. *You would be at the center of this in every way.*

When she flushes, I belatedly realize what I've said and cringe. *I didn't mean it like that. Only that whilst you would be asleep, this whole process is based on your consent. What you tell us we can do, and what we can't do.*

I hold her eyes as I continue. *Where we can touch you. Use our mouths on you. Undress you. Before, after and during. Every small aspect would be something you have given us permission to do.*

Fuck. I have to stop. The way she watches me – her lips parting, her breathing a little heavier - is making me want to throw all of the rules out of the window. Shaking out my hands, I take a breath.

Finally, she swallows and looks away. "I need to think about this."

"A good idea." Jenson nods. "And if you would prefer not to hear from us again, we'll respect your wishes. If you do decide you might be interested, we can meet and go over the agreement in detail."

Her lips twitch upward. "The ball is in my court, right?"

River winks at her, his face a mixture of nerves and relief. "Exactly right."

She nods, twisting her fingers. "Can I... how would I contact you?"

River gives her all of our numbers. "Just in case. One of us will always answer."

She turns her phone over in her hands, her eyes cast down. "This is all very... businesslike."

The three of us exchange glances. Jenson holds up his hand when River opens his mouth, stopping him. "Because these boundaries are important. This is a formal agreement, Briar. We don't take it lightly,

and neither should you. If you decide to go ahead, then things will be different. But there will be an end date. This is not a permanent offer. But everything is set out to protect you, and us."

River scowls at him, but Jenson doesn't move. "I need you to understand that."

This is his line. His only boundary, since he's already pushed his other one aside for us.

Not someone we'll grow to care about.

Briar nods. "But you do... *want* me?"

Jenson looks as if someone's punched him in his kidney at the small, self-conscious words. He almost takes a step toward her before pulling back, clenching his fists. "Wanting you is not an issue. If you sign the agreement, we'll show you *exactly* how much."

"But only while I'm sleeping." She sounds thoughtful as she peeks up at him.

He nods. "We'll wait for you to decide. Take your time. And for the love of God, lock your damn door."

With that, he strides to the door and yanks it open, disappearing into the street. River smiles down at Briar, unusually gentle. "Thank you for the jacket."

He slips his hands into his pockets before he leaves, his whistle reaching us just as the door closes.

I wait until she looks at me. *We really didn't mean to hit you with this today. R met you, and he liked you. We just wanted to meet you too.*

Briar's fingers move. *Did you... like me too?*

A quick movement. *Yes. Very much.*

She smiles, then. Just for me. *I'll think about it. Kai.*

She fingerspells each letter of my name, pausing when my fingers land on hers. *Use this instead.*

Her hand is warm underneath mine as I draw back, sketching the sig.

She copies my movement, a question in her eyes. *Human?*

I gave it to me. A story for another day.

The door is open when she clears her throat. "Thank you for sharing that with me. Your name."

A small moment. Inconsequential. But I still feel more visible in this moment than I have for years. Just as much of a person as Jenson or River, and they'd pin me down and beat me if they ever knew I even had those thoughts.

You're welcome.

BRIAR

At least my body waits until they're gone before it fritzes out on me completely. Staggering back into the chair before I hit the floor, I push my head down between my thighs and wait for the dizziness to subside.

"What just happened?" I mutter weakly. "What the *hell* was that?"

The last thirty minutes already feel like some sort of fever dream. Dragging my phone from the pocket of my dress, I quickly flick through to make sure their numbers are actually there, and the whole thing wasn't a figment of my overactive imagination.

I'm going to be really angry if I wake up and this entire discussion was a figment of my overactive imagination.

Just to be sure, I pinch the inside of my thigh hard, hissing at the sharp pain.

Not a dream. Real.

And their numbers are right there, staring back at me from the screen.

River. Jenson. Kai.

Three men. Three tall, intense, almost freakishly handsome men who want... *me*.

Who want to drug me. And fuck me.

I shove my head back between my thighs, taking deep breaths.

This is one of those times when I wish I kept a bottle of wine here for emergencies. But I feel better once I've got a coffee in my hands, my shaking subsiding. I'm on my way back to my chair, my thoughts jumbled, when I spot something on my desk.

The envelope has my name on it. Setting down my drink, I flip it open, my lips parting at the wad of cash that I yank out. A note tumbles out with it.

For the jacket.

- *River*

And there's a business card. He must have put it there before I took their numbers. Turning the card over, I run my fingers over the black velvet, intricate gold thread spelling out a name – *Mystic*.

Maybe he works there. River's name and number is there too, etched into the back when I flip it over.

River Huxley, Owner.

Tucking the card away in my pocket, I reassess the pile of cash. It's far too much, and my lips press together as I pull out the amount needed for the jacket and tuck the rest back inside.

I'll use his number for one thing, at least.

The rest... I need to think about.

BRIAR

My stomach roils as I stare at the ceiling of my darkened bedroom. Sleep once again has proved an impossibility, the clock beside my bed telling me that it's after midnight even though I was in bed by nine.

My father didn't say a thing about my early night. He's not even here, caught up in some urgent casework that means I probably won't see him until tomorrow night, if he comes home at all.

Irritated, I shift onto my side, punching at my pillow and trying to separate my racing thoughts into anything resembling sense.

You want to have sex with me while I'm unconscious?

The memory of Kai's blue eyes burning into me as the words flowed through my fingers stays with me, my body heating up.

It's... ridiculous. Obscene. *Dangerous*, even.

I should block their numbers and forget I ever met them.

Even vaguely considering their offer in the privacy of my bedroom is pushing the boundaries I at least thought I had so far into the realm of fucked-up that I wonder exactly what's wrong with me.

I should be disgusted. Offended.

I should be... so why am I *not*?

Instead, my skin feels too hot, prickling with an electricity that has me kicking the sheets down my bed in irritation. I didn't bother with

pyjamas, and my skin gleams in the chink of moonlight from where I yanked the curtains closed without paying attention.

It's too easy to let my imagination run free in the dark. To imagine large, tanned hands spreading over my stomach, sliding up and over my breasts. The images unfurl like a movie in my head, and I bite down on my lip as my stomach flips.

There's nobody here.

Nobody would *know*.

Slowly, I lift my arms up. Let my hands settle against the pillow on either side of my head, in the position I tend to favor while I'm sleeping... and let my eyes slide closed.

What would it be like?

My breathing speeds up, loud in the silent room as I force my legs to relax. Force my entire body to relax. My legs fall open, and I inhale the feel of the cool air.

They would come to me like this. And I would have no idea what they were doing. What part of me they were touching. They could look, and touch, and – and *fuck*, pushing inside me. Using my body in whatever way they wanted, like a doll.

And I wouldn't *know*.

My stomach flips again, my body tingling. Slamming my legs closed, I take a deep breath with my eyes still closed, feeling the wetness between my legs.

Every single part of this – every single thing – is in your control.

Steel-gray eyes, harsh words and a promise made. And it's those words that keep circling in my head.

I've never been in control of anything in my entire life. Every decision made for me. What I ate, how I dressed, who I spoke to.

I'm *already* a doll. A pretty, perfect, doll.

I'd be stupid to take this any further. To say yes.

But I can at least admit to myself that I'm curious. Curious as to what would make three men who look like they'd have absolutely no issues recruiting willing participants approach a complete stranger with an offer like this.

And maybe I'm a little flattered that they would want me at all.

Sign the agreement, and we'll show you just how much.

Swallowing, I swing my legs out of bed, sitting up and reaching for the water I keep there at night. Even draining it does nothing to bank the burning inside me.

I want to know more.

And... My father isn't home tonight. The staff we have here don't live in at my father's preference, meaning the house is empty.

There's no one here to know if I slipped out. Just for a couple of hours.

My eyes linger on the dress I tugged off earlier before my bath, tossed over the chair. The card feels heavy in my hand.

I could call them. Ask the questions in my head over the phone.

But it won't soothe the burning curiosity I have. To see them again. To learn more about them. River, Jenson, and Kai.

And if I was going to say yes – which I'm not going to – that would be a sensible thing to do. Responsible, even.

My eyes catch on the envelope I tossed onto my dressing table earlier.

And I even have a reason.

RIVER

“Where’s your head tonight?”

Tilting my head toward Dove, I lift one shoulder. “Nowhere in particular.”

My bar manager, five foot nothing with the attitude of a bridge troll and the soul of a psychopath, eyes me with something bordering on disgust. “Is it a girl?”

“What? No. Jesus, Dove. I’m not talking about my love life with you.”

She cackles, spinning in place with her arms out wide as if she’s on a fairground ride. There’s something not right in her head, but the bar has never run so smoothly than it has under her watch. Probably something to do with the bat she keeps tucked away in the corner. It only took six smashed kneecaps, four sets of broken teeth and one green-faced visit to the emergency room with a pair of balls clutched in his grip – literally – to get the message across that she’s not to be fucked with.

And that was... I think back. Three years ago? In her first *week*.

“Sure you can.” She raps her knuckles on the bar. “I’m an excellent listener.”

I eye her warily. “I tried to speak to you about restocking last night, and you started doing the can-can in the middle of the bar.”

Her face turns serious. "Your voice was boring me, Geraldine."

For fuck's sake. "I am your boss, you know."

"Which is why you still have your eyes, Gerry baby." With that absolutely fucking terrifying statement, she waltzes off to serve a floppy, frat-looking guy at the other end of the bar who clearly hasn't received the memo, given the way he was staring at her ass a moment ago.

She *looks* like a fairytale princess, but she's actually the fucking devil.

Thirty seconds later, I'm on my feet and ducking under the bar, swearing under my breath as I storm over to her. Dove blinks down at the unconscious guy. A significant egg is forming in the middle of his forehead. "I didn't slam him that hard. It won't even leave a dent."

And not a fuck was given.

"How can someone so small create so much fucking chaos?" Gesturing to the security guys, we watch in silence as they drag him out and I make a mental note to have him barred from all of our places.

Wait – not silence. Jesus. She's humming the damn Funeral March.

Edging away, I point a thumb over my shoulder, unashamedly searching for an escape route as she turns slowly, pinning ridiculously violet eyes on me. "I'll be... er.... out there."

She blinks, slowly. "You can run, Gerry. I'll find you."

Fuck. Me.

I almost slam into Kai in my haste to put as much distance between us as possible. "Don't go near Dove tonight. She's in a mood."

Kai only nods, his jaw tight. He's dressed for another night of fights, his fists wrapped.

Frowning, I grab his arm as he tries to slip past me. "Again? That's every night this week."

Just letting off steam.

I fall into step beside him, changing my original route. "She'll call."

His hands jerk in a brief see-saw motion. *Maybe.*

"Where's Jenson? Is he back?"

He points over his shoulder toward the office. Slowing, I watch as he heads toward the ring, people shifting out of his way. He gets a few nods, but nobody speaks to him.

Fucking assholes.

Jenson clearly is in a mood too. His words are short and terse when I rap my fingers against the door. "Fuck off."

"It's me." Ducking inside, I take in the glass in his hands, barely an inch of liquid left. "Hope you saved some for me."

He doesn't drink alone in here often. It's the sign of a bad night. "Kai's fighting again."

Jenson takes a deep slug before pouring himself a refill, yanking a second glass to him before sliding it over to me. "Fifteen years today."

I pause, mentally counting. No wonder he got in the ring last night. "Shit. I didn't—,"

"We wouldn't expect you to." He stares down into his glass. "I went to their grave today. After we left Briar."

Fuck. No wonder he's losing himself in a bottle. "I still think you gave her too much, putting them together. She deserved to be tossed into the fucking sea."

Jenson sighs, and at that moment he looks far older than thirty-three. "It made no difference to me. Besides, I didn't do it for them."

"He doesn't visit her."

"He might, one day." Jenson stands, tugging his jacket into place without missing a beat. "And if he does, he'll have somewhere to go. I'll watch the floor tonight. Have a night off."

When I protest, he shakes his head. "I need the distraction. For several reasons."

I pick up my own drink at that, throwing the last of it back before I stand as well. "You think she won't call?"

Jenson's voice filters back to me. For once, there's no harshness in his tone. Only an old pain that stretches back nearly half our lives.

"I think your Briar Rose would be out of her mind to come anywhere near us."

JENSON

Every single year.

It's always a bad night. A reminder. I can hear the roar of the crowd in the next room even over the pounding bass of the music in here. Kai is giving them the show they want, and they have no idea why. What drives him to fight with such wild abandon that you'd think he was fighting for his damn life.

I should pull him out. Force him to take a break. But he's old enough – more than fucking old enough, now – to make his own choices.

Particularly when he's had so few of them in the past.

Leaning back against the wall, I cross my arms and stare out across the crowd. It's busy tonight, the long black marble bar at least five deep with Dove flitting back and forth, four others helping her. Managing Mystic is River's job, and he does it well – the club a convenient front for some of the darker requirements that crop up in my role as the leader of the Diamonds.

What's left of us, at least. Even after all these years, we're still nowhere near the numbers we used to have. It's a weakness that could be exploited by Alyss and Keenan if they saw past the mask we put on when we need to, but so far they've left us alone. More

than enough has been happening in their own worlds to stare too closely at ours.

Scrubbing my hands over my face, my thoughts wander elsewhere.

I wonder how Briar Rose is sleeping tonight. We're well into the witching hour, midnight passing more than an hour ago and dragging me into memories of a past I'd rather fucking forget.

We probably shocked her. Blew her innocent little worldview apart and scandalized her. Hell, we gave her enough gossip to dine out on with her friends for weeks. The thought makes me grimace.

We moved too fast. Rushed it. Swept up in River and Kai's keenness, I let my usual instincts take a backseat in favor of something more... primal.

Not just them. I *wanted* her. Still want her, even as I try not to think of silky black hair across satin sheets that makes me shift in place.

I taste sour regret at the back of my throat, as it tightens.

It's for the best if we never hear from her again. She doesn't belong with us. Not even for something temporary.

She belongs in her undoubtedly sheltered world. Safe, and warm, and—

My eyes catch on something in the far corner. Something out of place, and I straighten. Every fucking warning instinct I have starts to blare, a red fucking flag.

The fuck?

BRIAR

"Are you sure? Thank you so much!"

Smiling brightly at the man who beckons me past the long queue of people, I offer the girls at the front of the line an apologetic smile as he lifts the rope and I slip past them. The man, at least a foot taller than me and almost twice as wide with a shaved head, glances at me askance. "You in the right place?"

"Absolutely. This is – this is Mystic, right?"

He nods, still looking at me strangely before he shrugs. "No cover charge for you. Go on in."

"Very kind of you." I beam at him, smoothing down my dress. He blinks before pulling open the dark glass double-doors, and I step inside. My head cranes back to try to take everything in at once.

It's really loud in here. A wall of noise hits me so hard I take a small step back before steadying myself. A huge dancefloor runs the length of the room, the black floor glittering with some kind of effect as hundreds of people move to the music being played from above their heads. Colored strips of lighting sweep over their faces as I take a breath and plunge into the crowd, heading for the bar I spotted against the far wall.

I squeeze in between two larger groups, only waiting a few minutes before scarlet, pointed nails tap on the marble. "What's it

gonna be?"

"Uh...", I glance up. The wall of bottles stretches to the ceiling. It's a little intimidating. "Surprise me?"

The bartender, a tiny, pixie-haired woman with incredibly pretty eyes, grins. "My favorite drink."

I watch as she darts up and down, her fingers dancing over glass without seeming to even look as she pours several potent-looking liquids into a tumbler and shakes it with ice before she pours it into a glass.

Should have asked for wine.

It's the only alcohol I've ever tasted. The woman bounces back to me with a wide grin. "Here you go! One *surprise me.*"

I take a sip as I hand her some cash from my purse, along with enough for a decent tip, and try not to gasp as it burns a line down my throat. "Wow. That's... something. Thank you."

"You're welcome." Her head tilts. "I haven't seen you before."

"I've never been here before."

Her eyes widen, as if she's absolutely delighted. "Fresh meat?"

I blink. "Sorry?"

She laughs, a loud, surprisingly sultry giggle that draws eyes her way. "I like you. I'm not working on Wednesday. You should come and drink with me."

I have a feeling that drinking with her would get very messy, very quickly. "I'll try."

"Great! I'm Dove." She waves frantically at me as if I'm twenty feet away and not right in front of her before she turns to the guy beside me, her smile slipping into something resembling horror. "I'm not serving you. You look possessed."

Is she... making the sign of the cross?

"Shoo! Be gone, foul creature!"

And she has a bat. Wow.

Backing away, I take another look around the club. There's no chance of spotting River, Jenson or Kai – if they're even here.

Swaying in place, I take another sip of my drink as I listen to the music. I can feel the echo of it inside my chest like a second heartbeat.

This... doesn't seem so bad. Maybe not somewhere I could see myself spending a lot of time, but there's something in the air. An excitement. Anticipation, maybe. It fills the people around me as I find a slightly quieter spot against the wall with a tall table and lean on it, watching them.

So many different lives – hopes, dreams, fears, worries - all in the same space, dancing to the same song at this precise moment. Connected in a single small way, before they go about their own lives. This particular group of people will never be in the same room together again.

It's a beautiful thought, really. And maybe a little sad.

The voice makes me jump. "Want to dance?"

Twisting my head, I offer a small smile to the sandy-haired man lingering nearby. He looks friendly enough, his checkered shirt open at the neck and his brown hair neatly trimmed. He smiles back, holding out his hand. "David."

I hesitate, but reach for it, keeping my drink out of easy reach. It's a little clammy. "Briar."

"Pretty name." He moves in a little closer, his voice raising to be heard over the music. "You on your own?"

"Well, this looks cosy."

Both of our heads jerk around at the low, drawled words. Jenson stares down at me, those gray eyes like flint. He doesn't look at David. "Whoever you are, leave. Now."

And with those two words, the burning I fled my bedroom to escape erupts again, surging back to live beneath my skin as I stare up at him.

Two words. That's all it took.

David didn't even raise a flicker.

"Briar Rose." Jenson's eyes travel over me slowly, cataloguing my outfit. "What exactly are you doing in our club?"

I take a sip of my drink to buy time, forgetting how strong it is and nearly choking. "This is a public place, isn't it? Maybe I'm here to dance."

"Or maybe you were curious. And not about the club." His low words have my head jerking up. He's watching me closely, but his

eyes travel to my drink. "What the hell is that?"

It is a rather vibrant shade of green.

He has it out of my hand before I can stop him, sniffing before he yanks it away with a look of disgust on his face. "This is one of Dove's special concoctions. Do *not* drink this. You'll end up waking up a week from now, wondering what happened."

I push my tongue into my cheek. "Kind of thought you'd be into that."

He pauses, eyes dropping to mine. "Funny."

I mean, I thought so.

I purse my lips. "Can I have my drink back?"

"No." His voice is terse as he slams my drink down. "Come with me."

He reaches out, but he stops, turning and stalking off. Frowning, I watch as he stops, glancing over his shoulder. "Let's see if I can settle some of that curiosity of yours."

I follow him over to the bar, watching as he slips behind and returns, a bottle of water in his hands. "You're not having this conversation without a clear head."

Weighing the bottle in my hands, I wonder what he'd do if I tossed it back at him. I'm not quite brave enough to find out. "I didn't ask for a conversation at all."

"Didn't you?" The gruff words make my heart leap as we move around the crowded dance floor. He pushes open a door I didn't even notice, and I slip through. The noise behind us fades as he pushes the door shut. "I'll leave it unlocked. Tell me you locked your door earlier."

The abrupt question makes me flush. "Uh. No. But I will from now on."

"Good." He waves at a large, comfortable-looking chair on the other side of the desk. "Sit here."

In his chair. "What about you?"

"I can stand." He folds his arms, waiting, and I notice that he shifts away as I sidle past him, sinking down into the leather.

We watch each other.

Heat, Flickering, burning *heat*. Just from the way he looks at me, his brows slightly furrowed and his gray eyes dark.

I wonder if he's imagining how I'd look—

Stop.

Linking my fingers together, I glance around, resisting the urge to fan myself. "Are River and Kai here?"

"River went home. He has the night off. Kai's around, but he's tied up at the moment."

A little pang of disappointment hits me. "Okay."

It's not like they were expecting me. Reaching into my bag, I pull out the envelope and hold it out. "Could you give this to River for me, please?"

Slowly, his fingers reach out. "What is it?"

I settle back, the leather warm against my bare upper back. Jenson's eyes slip to my thighs, the midnight blue silk rising up before he looks away. "He gave me too much money for the jacket repair. It's his change."

He releases the envelope immediately. "Consider it a tip."

I hold his gaze, and my voice sharpens. I don't lower it. "I'm not for sale."

It doesn't matter how much I need the money. "It creates a power imbalance that I'm not comfortable with. Not when—"

My words cut off, my cheeks flaring with heat. "Please take it."

Jenson's eyebrows raise almost to his hairline, and his fingers immediately snag the envelope from mine. "Understood. I'll make sure he gets it."

"Thank you." I smooth a hand over my lap. "Would you sit down?"

He hooks his foot around the metal of the shabby-looking chair across from me and drags it toward him, folding himself into it. "What would you like to know?"

Okay, then. Blowing out a breath, I go back into my bag and tug out the slip of paper. Jenson's mouth twitches. "You came with a list?"

"I like to be organised." And I knew he'd distract me, make me forget. "Should I just run through?"

"By all means." He lounges back in the chair, looking as ease on the cheap metal as if it were a throne. "Ask anything you like."

I glance down. "Just so I'm completely clear. You want to make an arrangement with me where *I* will be asleep, and *you* – all three of you – will have sex with me. The details to be confirmed through an agreement."

When my eyes flick up, Jenson is staring at me. There's a faint flush of color on his cheeks. "Yes."

There's matching heat on my own face as I glance down, clearing my throat. "Where would this arrangement happen? At a hotel?"

"No. We have a home in the city – Ravenhall. It's large enough to give you space, and for us to have privacy. It's highly secure and nobody else will be present."

I'd be completely alone with them. In their *home*. "Would you just... wait for me to fall asleep?"

Slowly, he shakes his head. His voice is lower, and he leans forward. Our eyes lock. "You would wake up."

I swallow. Loudly. "So—,"

"As part of the agreement, we would insist that you visit a doctor to make sure you're healthy before we begin anything. That's non-negotiable for us to move forward. As part of this, the doctor would calibrate a suitable dose of sleeping medication that would keep you unaware for a period of approximately eight hours." Jenson clears his throat. "Because of this, we would also insist that the arrangement be limited to once a week. It wouldn't be good for you to take it long-term."

I absorb the words, surprised at the mention of a doctor. "What kind of doctor would give me – someone – sleeping pills for something like *this*?"

"A very well-paid one." He sits back again, crossing his arms. "What else?"

"You mentioned that this would be temporary." My voice shakes, and I pause to take a sip of water. "How temporary?"

His gaze rakes over me. "Three sessions. Three nights. It works out to approximately twenty-four hours that you would be... available to us."

I take another, longer sip of water as my head reels.

Twenty-four hours with them. Not just with them, but unconscious. Used by them.

Fucked by them.

Holy shit.

And I realize... I'm actually considering doing this. Signing myself up for those twenty-four hours, with them.

My hand shakes as I lower the bottle. Jenson marks it, those deep eyes seeing everything, but he doesn't comment. "You said I would be the one in control. That you wouldn't... do anything to me unless I say you can. How does that work, if I'm asleep?"

Jenson flows to his feet, the movement surprisingly graceful as he rounds the desk. Pulling a key from his pocket, he bends down to unlock the silver metal drawer beside me and tugs out a folder before returning to his seat. Silently, he flicks through the pages before holding some out. "You would complete this. Before signing, and a check on each night, to see if anything's changed. Everything on this list is something you can decide on. We've tried to make it as exhaustive as possible. Figured it was more responsible to add something we probably wouldn't look to do rather than leave it off and possibly have it come up as an issue."

My voice is small as I glance down. There are so many rows that my head begins to swim. "Absolutely. Very... responsible."

This is – it's a lot. My mouth dries as I blindly flick through the pages, my hand flying to my throat. "*Tattoos?*"

Something that might be amusement glints in Jenson's eyes. "Like I said. Better to have it all in writing. And although it might not be our thing, it could be yours."

I quickly flip the page closed. "It's not."

"I didn't think so." There's definitely amusement in his voice now. "Unless you're hiding something beneath that scrap of a dress."

I smooth my hand over it, even as something close to hurt pricks at my chest. "I made this dress myself."

"It's a beautiful dress." Any humor vanishes from his voice, replaced by something darker. "And you look exquisitely fuckable in it. Silk suits you. You should wear it as often as possible."

Fuck. Me.

I can't look up, my face burning as I feign flicking through the list, even though I'm not reading any of it. When I finally pull myself together, his head is tilted. His face has turned blank, unreadable. "I have a question for you."

I wave my hand lazily, feigning ease. "Sure."

"Are you a virgin?"

My hand pauses in mid-air. "I don't believe my previous sexual experience is any of your business."

"And you would be right." I slide my eyes to him, taking in the way his fist is clenched where it's balanced on his knee. "But this is not an arrangement for someone with no experience, Briar. Some, I can work with. But your first time shouldn't be like this. If you are, this discussion ends here."

It ends here.

"No," I say finally, meeting his gaze. "I'm not a virgin. But I don't have a lot of experience."

I almost miss his small exhale. "Like I said. I can work with that."

A rather horrifying thought strikes. "The doctor – what kind of checks will they do? Invasive ones?"

"If you're asking if Emily will need to look at your pussy, the answer is no. The only people getting anywhere near your undoubtedly pretty cunt will be us."

His words are coarse, crude. Unexpectedly so. I blink at him. "You're... testing me. Aren't you? You really think I'm so inexperienced that I'd run because you said *that*?"

Jenson does smile, then. A curling, dangerous smirk that makes my own toes curl inside my heels. "It's not a test. Not the kind that you're thinking. But something like this – it takes a lot of trust. You'll be giving over your body to three men to use – within the terms of the agreement – however the hell we like."

"I'm struggling to see the connection."

"If we go ahead with this," he says slowly. My breath catches as he leans forward and I do the same, moving toward him almost without realising. "Then very soon, I will be burying my cock inside you, Briar."

I stop breathing altogether, watching him.

"I will thrust inside your cunt," Jenson murmurs. He doesn't look away, pinning me with eyes of steel and fire. "Strip you bare, wrap that fucking gorgeous hair around my fist and bend you however the fuck I want. Maybe I'll fuck your mouth, massage your throat until you drink every drop of me. Or I'll flip you over, spread your ass and see exactly how much your body is capable of. Not just me, but River. Kai. The three of us. Likely at the same time. Possibly in the same tight little hole. If you decide to move forward with this, then for those hours, we will own your body. Own *you*. And if a few words in a bright office when it's just us makes you uncomfortable, Briar Rose, then this is as far as you should take it."

His eyes burn. "Because I guarantee you that we will take it a lot fucking further."

There's only a few inches separating us. My breathing sounds harsh as Jenson studies me, not pulling back. "I want to see you in our bed. Spread out for me as you sleep, completely unaware of exactly how much I'm going to use you. And I will protect you, and make sure you are *safe* with us at every single moment. But not at the expense of something you can't take back."

A small noise escapes my throat, and his brows draw together. He almost looks...disappointed. "You don't need to be scared of me. This won't go any further."

"No." I try to breathe. "I'm not scared. I...,"

I think I've ruined my dress.

Because I'm soaking, so much so that I'm genuinely concerned for the leather beneath me. Trembling, just from those words. And the way that he says them. As if it's not just a want for him, but a need. For *me*. And the way he looks at me as he says them – as if I'm important.

I need more. Want *more*.

I bite down on my lip, and dawning awareness darkens his gaze. "Are you wet, Briar?"

God. Slowly, I nod.

"Show me."

My whole body locks up. "What? That's not—,"

"Not part of the agreement." His voice is a rasp over my skin, goose pimples springing up on my arms. "I know. But I want to see. Stand up, lift up your dress, and show me. *Please.*"

He waits. I'm not sure my legs will hold me. Not sure what the hell I'm doing. But he sucks in a sharp breath as I slowly push to my feet. I can feel my dress sticking to me, the thin nude lace underwear I chose underneath not nearly enough to stop my body from making it *very* obvious just how much I enjoyed Jenson's speech.

And he's about to see the evidence. His jaw is tight, his eyes on my face. "You can say no."

I don't want to say no.

Sliding my hands down to my thighs, I grip the edges of my dress and drag it up, baring myself to him, inch by torturous inch.

I'm not naked. There's nothing to show, not really. Nothing except my soaking wet underwear. Jenson leans forward, staring at it with a focus that makes my knees weak.

At this moment, he looks... ravenous. I feel like prey beneath his gaze, pinned, *helpless*.

"Say yes." He doesn't look at me. Doesn't look away from what he's pulled from me. "I'm not nearly done with you yet, Briar Rose. Say yes."

I know I'm going to say yes.

And I know what I want.

"I want you to talk to me." Jenson's eyes flare wide as he registers my words.

I let my dress fall, soaking in the hint of disappointment in his eyes. "When it's happening. When you're with me. That's my condition. Talk to me like you just did."

"Done." He doesn't hesitate, his knuckles white as he leans forward and clasps his hands together. "It was already happening. What else?"

My lips part, hesitation stealing my breath before I pull myself together. Can I—

Do it. Say it.

"Film it. Film it so I can watch it back the next day. So I can be... part of it."

His lips part. "I... that's not something we'd thought of. But yes. We can make that happen. It'll be on a closed circuit, the footage available on a laptop only at our home and wiped when you're finished."

I get to watch.

"Done, then." I whisper.

His face shifts, uncertainty flickering. "Wait. You're—,"

"I'm saying yes." To a deal with the devil. Because if Jenson can bring me to the brink of an orgasm with just a few words, I have no doubt that I'll never be the same after this ends. "To you."

"You. We have *you*."

My underwear cannot get a break tonight. "Yes. You have... me."

And there's no longer any doubt in my mind that he wants me. Not when he looks at me like that.

He looks...unsteady. As if my words have knocked him from his axis. "To all three of us."

River, with his golden skin and dimpled smile. And Kai, with his sapphire eyes and hands that I've imagined spreading over my skin, tracing patterns into my flesh.

"Yes," I breathe. "You have yourself a deal."

Three nights.

Twenty-four hours.

Theirs.

And I have a feeling it's going to ruin me.

JENSON

She's quiet beside me as I pull down one of the nicer city streets, a row of staccato townhouses stretching out before us. "You can drop me here."

I hesitate, but pull in, turning off the engine. We both sit there for a moment, lost in thought. Although my thoughts are lost in her.

She said yes.

"You can still change your mind, you know. At any time."

I can feel Briar's eyes on the side of my face, although I keep them on the back of the car in front of us. But it sounds as if she might be smiling. "I'm not going to change my mind."

There's a lot still to discuss. The doctor, the forms, her preferences. Selecting what she wants, from the menu of options clutched tightly in her hands. "Call me – any of us – if you have any questions, no matter how small. I'll send you Emily's details to make an appointment."

It doesn't feel like enough. Not when the next time I see her, she might be underneath me, those golden, soft-looking thighs she showed me open to our touch. "Any questions at all. I mean it."

"I have one question." Her voice is as soft as the silk she's dressed in when I turn to her. "Why do you want to do this?"

My hands tighten where they grip the steering wheel, my words pushed out through sheer force of will. "Does that matter?"

It's a reasonable question. One that I don't want to answer.

She studies my face. "Yes. It matters to me. Is it – is it because you don't like to be touched?"

My head jerks back. "What?"

How the hell does she—

"You shift your body to avoid it." Her green eyes see too damn much. "It's small, but I noticed in your office, when I tried to move past you. It was more than politeness. Wasn't it?"

Shit. My mouth dries up. "Yes. I don't... respond well to it."

"But you can touch others." Her voice is quiet, thoughtful. "It's the action of people touching *you* that makes you uncomfortable."

Fucking hell, she's perceptive.

"It must be difficult to be with someone and not have them reach for you." There's something careful in her voice, and I don't particularly like it, my body prickling. As if she's analysing me. Seeing the gaps, the ragged holes in my psyche.

"If you're looking for a sob story, you won't find it here." I'm not going into our history. Not that it's only mine to share. "You're correct. I find it difficult to receive touch – and this arrangement will remove that option."

She can't touch me, *reach* for me, if she's unconscious. Even the thought has something coiled tight inside loosening. "You'll need to ask River and Kai for their reasons. They're not mine to give."

"Of course." She sounds subdued. "Thank you for telling me."

My brow lifts. "I'm not sure I told you anything. You seem to see quite a bit, however."

Her cheeks flush. "I spent a lot of time watching people when I was younger from my window. I used to enjoy trying to work out the type of person they were. Their story. I'm sorry if I've brought something up that you don't like talking about."

"And you?" I cut that discussion off, not wanting her to look any fucking deeper than she already has. "What's your reason?"

I study her face in the darkness. The way her eyes drop to her lap, studying her hands.

"When you have never had a choice," she says finally, "being offered one is a gift. An opportunity I don't intend to waste, before —,"

"Before?"

"Before they put me in a box I can't get out of. Before I stop looking for those choices at all."

Something thuds inside my chest at those whispered words. "Briar —,"

"I have to go." She's already opening the car door, slipping out of the jacket I handed her to wear as we left the club. Her face appears in the doorway. I drink in her flushed complexion, the way she tucks a piece of hair back behind her ear. "Bye, Jenson."

And then she's gone, the door closing carefully behind her before I can respond. I wait as she walks away, her arms wrapped tightly around her body as she makes her way to a dark house halfway down the street and heading up the steps. She lingers in the doorway for a minute before slipping her key into the lock and vanishing.

My head thuds back against the seat.

Now to tell the others.

I swing past Mystic to collect Kai before heading back to Ravenhall, the night making way for early dawn. Dove waves at me cheerily from the doorway as he shrugs past her, a holdall over his shoulder and a new set of bruises covering his face to add to the collection he already has. The cut above his eye looks like it's reopened, and he doesn't look at me as he slides into the seat Briar recently vacated. His arms slash in a cross, just once.

Don't.

Lips pressing together, I pull away from the curb. We make the trip back in silence. Kai's eyes are closed as if he's feigning sleep, but his breathing is a little too harsh to get away with it.

"I need to speak to you in the kitchen. River too." Yanking the keys out of the engine, I step out. He follows my lead, stalking ahead and

pushing the front door open, River leaving it unlocked. He's already in the kitchen, awake and showered, flicking through his phone as he points to the coffee machine. "Just made it."

Kai heads for the fridge instead, pulling open a beer as I pour a coffee. "She said yes."

The movement around me ceases. With my back to them, I can't see either of their faces until I turn around.

They both stare at me, slack-jawed. Kai recovers first, the frustration from earlier replaced with something else. *You spoke to her?*

"She turned up at the club tonight."

Looking fucking edible.

"What?" River's head tips back. "Why?"

"Curiosity, I think." My lips tilt up. "I took her to the office, and we talked through some of the details. She has a copy of the full agreement to go through. But... she wants to do it."

"Shit." River runs a hand over his face, still disbelieving. "I really thought we weren't going to hear from her again."

Which reminds me. I slide the envelope from my jacket and toss it to him. "She wanted you to have this. Said it's your change. She was very insistent that she didn't want anything more."

He flicks through it, brows drawing down. "I meant to speak to her. It was to cover the rest of the clothes too."

My thoughts shift to the shabby-looking building she's based in, and the discussion I had over the phone on my way back from the graveyard. "We'll need to be mindful of how we approach her building. Briar was very clear that she wants this to feel equal. If she feels that we're throwing money at her, it tips the scales to us."

River presses his lips together as Kai glances at him. We all know that he's the one with a tendency to go over the top.

I study him before crossing my arms. "What have you bought her?"

Sighing, he tosses the envelope down. "A tablet. Her phone is practically a brick. She wants to advertise, and she'll need one."

"Hold onto it. At least for now." Leaning against the counter, I take another sip, feeling tiredness start to pull. It's been days since I slept

more than a few broken hours.

Did anything happen? Kai is watching me closely, a small furrow between his eyes.

I meet his gaze. "I didn't touch her."

That's not what I asked.

Sneaky fucker. I press my lips together. The image of Briar, shy and nervous as she stood there and lifted her dress for me to show me her underwear, soaked through with need... I straighten. "I'm heading up."

Kai looks sceptical, but he doesn't say anything else. I move past them, heading up to my own room. I'm already yanking off my clothes before my door even closes, stalking past my bed and into the bathroom.

Stepping into the shower, I slam one hand against the wall, the other finding my rock-solid cock and pumping it in hard strokes.

Flushed cheeks and parted lips. That growing, incriminating patch of arousal, spreading as I watched her.

"Fuck," I hiss. My cock feels like steel, hot and heavy as the images continue. Change.

Briar, on her knees, staring up at me. My hand in her hair, tugging her forward as I lift the head of my cock to those plump lips, rubbing myself over her. Marking her, her breathing growing heavier, her eyes lidded with desire.

Her hands, reaching for my cock. Warm, soft fingers wrapping around me as her lips seal around my length.

Touching me.

My bellow fills the room as I almost stagger from the strength of my release. It spurts out, hitting the wall of the shower in never-ending pulses until I sag forward, pressing my forehead into my arm.

Shit.

BRIAR

Smiling, I press the phone against my ear. "Did you know that your doctor thinks you're all psychopaths?"

River's warm, deep laugh fills my ear. "How did it go?"

I bite down on my lip, guilt snaking through me. "It was fine."

"You sure?" His voice lowers. "Anything make you uncomfortable?"

Sighing, I run my hand through my hair and lean back in my armchair. I've only just got here, taking a few hours this morning for a *very* interesting visit with the doctor they keep on call.

Who keeps their own doctor on call? Someone who prescribes sleeping medication for sex?

Although the older, stern-faced but kind woman I spent my morning with didn't seem too pleased about it. "She slid me a leaflet for a women's help center over the desk while she was talking. Didn't even miss a beat."

Silence. And then River speaks, amusement still in his voice. "I suppose I can't blame her, given what we're asking. But I'm glad she's looking out for you."

"Do you...," I stare up at the ceiling. "Have you sent her women before?"

"No." His immediate response has the tension in my muscles seeping out. "You're the first, and we've been working with her for

years. She probably thought we'd brainwashed you."

But she was thorough. We talked through the pros and cons of different birth control options, choosing a small rod for my arm that stings slightly beneath the dressing, and I had some tests done.

They're having the same tests. As long as everyone's results are negative, we won't be using condoms.

It all feels so *real*.

They've made sure every detail is covered. Things I would never have thought of. In the past week since I saw Jenson at the club – the memory still flooding my face with warmth – I haven't seen any of them. But we've spoken. "So what now?"

"She'll send us the report. No in-depth details, just a confirmation on if you're healthy enough to go ahead and the results of the tests you had while you were there." His voice turns teasing. "Anything you want to tell me now?"

I squeeze my eyes shut at the words that linger on my tongue. "No. Although I did have a severe iron deficiency when I was younger. My levels can still get slightly lower than normal, so I take tablets sometimes. I told her about it. I'm not taking anything at the moment, though."

I wonder if the blood test will throw up an abnormal red cell count. I've never felt so tired as I have in the last week, my sleep well and truly disrupted by dreams that have me waking up in a trembling mess.

But I've never felt so *exhilarated*.

"Is there anything we should look out for? Any symptoms?" Any amusement disappears from River's voice. "Anything you need us to keep here?"

Tension creeps back in. "No. I'm perfectly fine. I know my own body, River."

My words come out snappish.

Silence. River's voice is gentle when he finally speaks. "You absolutely do. So you'll let us know, if there is anything."

His careful sentence has my eyes closing.

"Sorry." I bite down on my lip. "I didn't mean to snap. It's just – my father is overprotective because of it. Always has been. And I

just... I don't want that to influence what happens here. Not when it's not relevant. I haven't been truly ill since I was fourteen."

"Noted. Let me know when you want me to collect the agreement."

I eye it, scattered over my desk. I still haven't finished it. Haven't decided on my own limitations. "I'll get it done today."

"No rush. Take your time."

When he's gone, I stand and make my way to the desk, settling into my chair and tugging the forms toward me. They're stapled together in an intimidating-looking package, and I take a breath before grabbing my pen.

The first few sections are easy enough. Some I've already done, like my health information as requested by the doctor. My emergency contact information, which I grimace at before giving my father's details.

It had better be a life-threatening emergency.

We're still not talking, the cold war helped along by the case he's working on. I've only seen him a handful of times, had a few stilted conversations before he's disappeared into the office he works in at home, or headed out to his firm.

And thankfully, it means I haven't had to endure any more dinners with Philip, or his mother.

Flipping to the next section, I squint down at the list. My throat dries up, eyes widening as I take in the first few lines, each with a helpful little tick box next to them.

Anal – use of finger (singular)

Anal – use of fingers (multiple)

Anal – use of fist

Anal – use of toy (non-vibrating)

Anal – use of toy (vibrating)

Anal – use of tongue

Wow.

"One at a time," I mutter to myself. "Everything is my choice."

But there are so *many* choices, stretching over what must be at least a dozen pages. I keep going, skating over A and moving on to B, my eyes only growing wider.

Body modification – piercing (please indicate locations and style)

Body modification – tattooing (please indicate locations and style)

Body modification – cold branding (please indicate locations and preferred style)

My hands are shaking as I grab my phone and send a message to Jensen. *What exactly is cold branding?*

A moment later, my phone pings. *A permanent brand on your skin. Something I have no intention of doing to you, even if you asked for it. It's a hard limit for us. We included everything to enable an open discussion if our expectations don't match.*

What if I do want it?

Then find a cattle farmer. I'm not as averse to tattooing, however.

My hand reaches for my throat at the thought of waking up to that. *What would you tattoo on me? If I tick the box?*

I'm not actually going to tick the box. Something tells me he knows that too. But he answers me anyway. *My name would look lovely in your skin, Briar Rose.*

The words, the mental image, steals my air for a moment. *Unfortunately, I'm leaving that box blank.*

A shame.

I keep going, moving faster now to see if there's anything else that I can send to him. To tease more of those words from him.

I don't think I'd enjoy caning.

His response appears seconds later. *I seem to have a lot of hard limits when it comes to you. No caning, whips, or anything else that will draw blood. The others will agree. Spanking with our hands is another matter. It may still leave a mark.*

Shivering, I flick through and tick the box. *I think that's acceptable.*

Another message comes through. *Truthfully, I have little interest in anything additional, be it toys or whips. You are more than enough to hold my attention. But if there's anything you'd like to explore, tick the box.*

My lips tilt up as I read another line, my awkwardness lessening the more we talk. My brows rise in surprise at the innocuous words. *Hair cutting?*

No.

I have a hair appointment this afternoon. My smile turns to a grin, remembering his words about my hair. *I'm considering a change. Would that be a problem?*

I'm not expecting the phone to light up in my hand, the buzz of an incoming call announcing Jenson's name on my screen. "Um. Hello?"

"You are not cutting your hair." His words are low and terse. The buzz of background noise fades behind him, as if he's stepped away from something.

To call me. About my hair. "Tell me you're joking."

He sounds... deadly serious. I swallow. "What if I'm not?"

"Then I would be bereft." He doesn't hesitate. "Your choice. Always. But if you possibly would be willing to... wait, until after the arrangement, I would be grateful."

I bite down on my cheek before I respond. "I'm not cutting my hair."

Jenson loosens a breath in my ear, and something unravels in my stomach. "Good."

"You really like my hair that much?" I ask curiously.

"Briar—"

He stops. Takes a breath. "I'm fucking obsessed with it."

And then, with those abrupt, rough words, he *hangs up*.

Well, then.

I glance back down to the form, the options underneath catching my eye.

Hair braiding

Hair brushing

Hair washing

Smiling, I tick off each one, leaving the cutting option blank before moving on. And when I'm finished a few hours later, I send all three of them a message.

I'm ready.

KAI

I check the street name on my phone again.

The tension in my body doesn't ease.

This is it.

The agreement is signed, every part of it double and triple-checked with Briar. Our boundaries are clear... and so are hers.

I swallow. My thumb taps restlessly against the wheel.

She's late. Only by a few minutes, but enough that nerves pound in a harsh rhythm against my ribcage.

She might have changed her mind. She might not come at all.

But I'll still wait. All night, if necessary. Just in case.

We've done everything possible to make sure Briar will be comfortable with us. The room is set up, the cameras already positioned based on her requests.

One in the corner, covering the room.

Another at the corner of her bed, for... close-ups.

Fuck.

Tonight is her first night. And we'll be following her instructions to the letter. Including her ask of us for this first time.

Scrolling through my phone, my finger hovers over the message.

One at a time. For the first time. Please.

Whatever she wants, she gets. Jenson will go first. River. And then... me.

It's no hardship for any of us, and even if it was, it wouldn't matter. Whilst we've discussed taking her between all of us and we fully intend to with her permission, there's no denying that each of us wants some time with her too. Time to adjust. To face the reasons we wanted to do this in the first place, at least for Jenson and I. Although River's nerves have started to show in the last day or so, his easy smile replaced by something more... focused.

I jolt as the car door opens, a wave of cool autumn air sweeping through as Briar slips inside, slamming the door behind her.

She doesn't say anything at first, her head bowed.

Carefully, I reach out and touch her shoulder. When she turns to look at me, my movement is quick. *What's wrong?*

"I...", She stops. Takes a breath. "It's not anything you've done – any of you. It's not *this*."

Okay. But something is wrong.

She lifts her eyes to my face, and I drink her in, worry warring with something hotter. She has her hair pinned back into a loose bun, tendrils of inky dark hair curled around her heart-shaped face.

Briar sighs. "This is the first time in my life that I've ever chosen something for myself."

My attention sharpens as she speaks. As the words roll from her lips, a frown between her green eyes as she talks.

To *me*.

"Every single part of my life has been chosen for me," she whispers, searching my face. "But this... I'm *choosing* this. Because I'm scared that one day, I'll look in the mirror and everything that makes me who I am will be gone. Wiped away before I even have a chance to learn who I could have been. Does that... Do I sound crazy? It's ridiculous."

She half-laughs, her eyes dropping. "I do, don't I? Sorry. This isn't – it's not exactly part of the agreement. Ignore me."

Slowly, I reach out. My fingers brush beneath her chin, nudging her back up to face me. Her eyes are damp.

I never had any choices either. It's why I'm like this.

She swallows. "Silent?"

I raise my hands. My voice. *I am not silent. I was silenced.*

This is a deep discussion. Too deep for now, especially when it's her pain I want to focus on. But I want her to know this much. My hands move jerkily, and that furrow deepens. I repeat it slowly, emphasizing the tense change at the beginning, the two phrases otherwise identical.

Understanding darkens her face. "Kai—,"

I can help you. If you need it.

I keep going, not looking away. Her situation is vastly different to mine, for obvious reasons. But the pain in her eyes... I recognise that all too well.

And the loneliness. I know that, too, as intimately as I know myself.

I will not let that happen to you, I sign, my heart pounding. I will not let them silence you. Whatever it is.

My hands snap closed, into tight fists, as the sheen in her eyes spills over. She dashes it away with her hand, glancing away from me. "Kai – that is... I don't have any words."

But I do. *Don't say anything. But the offer is there at any time. Night, or day. And after.*

After we're done. *There is no end date on this.*

If this girl needed me, I would go. And whoever they are, I would tear them apart for putting that look in her eyes.

I'm not the helpless child I used to be. And I will be a shield for her, if she needs it.

Several more tears fall. I keep my movements slow, raising my hand in a silent request for permission. When she nods, I carefully run my thumb under her eyes, wiping the tears away before I sit back, giving her time to compose herself.

"Can I touch you?"

The hesitant request has my head snapping around to hers. *Any time.*

Briar nods. Before I can take a breath, she shifts forward.

And her lips press against mine.

My inhale is sharp. Her kiss is feather-light, as soft as the rest of her. Unsure, almost. As if she's as uncertain at this moment as I am.

I have never been kissed. Never kissed anyone.

But it feels natural to slide my hand up to cup Briar's cheek, to tilt her face beneath mine and press back. She's a perfect fit beneath my touch, her lips a seamless shape against mine.

And the small noise she makes... I think I'd do anything to hear that noise again.

When we break apart, both of us are breathing heavily.

Flushed, she clears her throat. *Thank you. For... helping.*

My eyes are still wide. *If that's my reward, I'll help with whatever you want. Anything. Name it.*

Her smile is shaky, but genuine. "I'm ready to go. If you are."

To Ravenhall.

I'm taking her home.

And fuck, if I don't like the sound of that.

RIVER

"S top it."

Jenson pauses in his pacing to glower in my direction.

I wave a knife at him before sliding it into place on the table. Trying to at least give the impression of a civilised house. "Don't give me that look. You're making my head swim watching you stomp back and forth."

But I know how he feels. The same unease swirls in my stomach, the clock ticking on with no sign of Kai or Briar. "She'll be here."

I wish I believed my own optimism. Jenson clearly doesn't believe it either, carrying on with his stalking up and down the dining room. "Maybe we missed something."

"We didn't miss a thing." At least, he didn't, that razor-sharp focus coming in handy over the past few weeks. "You've been over everything, Jens. There's nothing else you could have done. If she decides this isn't for her, it's not because you missed a step."

And this is the final one. After tonight, there's no going back. We'll have been inside her, tasted her, even if she decides she doesn't want to see us again.

Fuck, I hope that's not the case.

What started as something new, something fresh and a little taboo to explore for me now feels like something I never knew I needed.

I need *her*. Need her the way I've been dreaming about. Briar has infiltrated my sleep, my waking hours, every fucking thought, it feels like. "She's coming."

Both of our heads shoot up at the telltale ding of the front gate. Jenson swivels in place, looking so undone in that moment that I hold my hands up. "Fucking hell. Jenson. Breathe."

But my own oxygen sticks in my lungs, refusing to move.
She's here.

BRIAR

The car is quiet as we make our way up the winding driveway. Kai pulled into a small, almost hidden entrance, entering a code before passing through ornate, wrought-iron gates that I've passed a dozen times. I always assumed this was a park, or some kind of private land. But I never imagined *this*. "I didn't even know this was here."

A different world, set in the middle of the city I've lived in for my entire life.

Kai glances at me with a small smile, one shoulder shrugging up as he pulls around a beautiful, white fountain to park the car in front of a set of carved dark wooden double doors.

When the engine is off, he signs. *Welcome to our home.*

Ravenhall. I understand the name now.

He circles the car to open my door, and I fight to regulate my breathing as I step out and look up at the building that towers over me.

Ravenhall is... a *castle*. Or close to. Gothic architecture is everywhere I look, from the steeple that rises up above us to the gargoyles perched, staring down at us with eerie expressions. Even the walls are made from a beautiful, dark-colored brick. "This is beautiful, Kai."

It almost looks like a church. Huge, stained windows with pretty arches that must cover two floors sit either side of the entrance. Warm light shines through both of them, scattering shades of color on the sandy gravel at my feet.

It should feel intimidating. But instead, it feels... warm. Inviting.

Kai holds out his hand. There's a question in his eyes.

I *kissed* him. Pressed my lips against his, full of emotion I couldn't have voiced if someone had tried to beat it out of me.

At least I can say I've kissed someone before we do this.

And it was... perfect.

The familiar nerves spring back to life in my chest as I take his hand. It covers mine, my fingers finding their way through his as he takes my small bag from my other arm and turns, leading me up the steps.

They're not going to know.

How could they, unless I tell them? The thought of what Jenson would say if he knew that I'm lying has my entire body flinching, and Kai squeezes my hand gently as if mistaking it for nerves.

The guilt snakes around my throat, threatening to strangle me.

They've gone out of their way to make me feel at ease. To put any worries I have at rest. And maybe they've done a little too good of a job at it. River's humor, Kai's shy kindness, Jenson's firm authority. It's painting a picture that I'm leaning into a little more and more, every day.

It's why I said yes to this. To them.

And if I'm going to lose my virginity, I want it to be with these men. Even if I'm not awake to experience it.

Better them than Philip.

Maybe there's no love here, but there certainly wouldn't be any there, either. The argument I had with my father before I left rings in my ears as Kai pushes the door open.

You will marry him.

No discussion. No options. A shouted, angry demand. Followed by an announcement that I'm to be fitted for my *wedding dress*. Tomorrow.

No, I have no regrets, aside from the lie. Gripping Kai's hand, I stare up with wide eyes at the vast, cavernous space. A huge wooden, elaborate staircase stretches out in front of me, the wide oak splitting into two sides that curve up and around to reach the second floor. I was right about the stained windows, each of them stretching up to the ceiling.

And in front of me—

"Briar." Jenson's eyes look bright. He doesn't smile, but that feels... normal, for him. "I'm glad you're here."

Beside him, River grins broadly. "I thought you might have thought better of spending an evening with us."

Behind him, I glimpse an open doorway to the right of the stairs. A table, set with silver. "I can't be put off quite that easily."

"Good." He winks. "I made dinner. Hope you're hungry."

"You cook?" I don't know why that surprises me. Maybe because he's so damn tall. He looks more like a Viking than a chef.

"I have many hidden talents." He bows, holding his arm out toward the dining room with a flourish. "After you."

He keeps up the discussion over a delicious dinner, Jenson and Kai occasionally chipping in. But all of them watch me. It's a heady feeling, and I take another sip of wine before reaching for my water. "You all live here, together?"

It's an unusual setup. River shrugs. "It works for us."

It does. This house... it suits them. The décor isn't overly done, simple but warm. Chunky, useful furniture, beautiful artwork on the walls. "How do you all know each other?"

Jenson glances at Kai. He's stilled beside me, and I look between them. "You don't have to answer."

"My father and River's father were best friends," Jenson says quietly. "We grew up together. Kai came along a little later."

It almost sounds like—

"Are you brothers?" They look so different, but the way that he says it makes them sound like family. "And I've just realised that I don't know how old you are."

Jenson's mouth twitches. "No. And I'm thirty-three. River is a few months behind me."

"Age before beauty. I'm thirty-two." River winks at me, pulling a smile from my lips. "Kai's the baby of our little trio. He's the same age as you."

My lips part. Kai tilts his head to glance at me with a small smile. "Oh."

Twenty-six. We're the same age.

He seems so much older than me.

That's what happens when you're kept in a bubble, Briar.

But not tonight. We finish dinner before Jenson broaches the reason I'm here. "How are you feeling about tonight?"

My fingers nearly fumble the stem of my wine glass as I meet his eyes. They're assessing, but not cold. The steel is darker tonight.

Swallowing, I take a breath to give them a proper answer. "A little nervous. But I haven't changed my mind."

"You still can," River says quietly. "At any time, up until we approach your door."

"I know." We've been over it several times. The medication issued by Emily will be waiting on my bedside table.

I can take it and go to sleep. My door left unlocked. Permission, and a silent invitation.

And if I change my mind, all I need to do is flick the lock. A silent signal that I'd prefer to sleep alone. I wouldn't even have to see them.

I look around at all three of them. My hands, clammy with nerves, shake as I take a sip. "I'm nervous, but I'm not scared. I trust you."

None of them would stop me if I wanted to walk out. Kai would drive me back to my house, drop me off, and that would be the end. There would be no more teasing calls with River. No more heated text exchanges with Jenson.

No more kisses with Kai.

It's the last thing I want.

So I steel myself, looking at Jenson before lifting my chin. "I'm ready to see my room, I think."

The atmosphere changes. Slowly, he pushes his chair back.

I do the same. The air suddenly feels too heavy, my chest tight.

My whisper sounds loud in the silence. "Goodnight."

Kai stops me, his hand on my arm. His lips curve up into a small smile before he leans in, his lips brushing against my cheek. *Sleep well.*

When I pull my eyes from him, River is next to my chair. He holds out his hand in a silent question, and I take it. He helps me up before lifting my wrist, and I suck in a breath as he twists it, pressing an open-mouthed kiss against my pulse. "Sweet dreams, Briar. Whatever you decide."

Holy shit.

This is it. I take a step away, still watching them before I turn to face Jenson. He's leaning against the door, his arms crossed. There's a look on his face I can't decipher as he turns, leading me into the open hall and up the main staircase, grabbing my bag on his way.

I'm going to—

They're going to—

"Briar."

I stare blankly ahead, trying to catch my breath. "I'm fine."

"No." Jenson's voice is soft. I pull my gaze up, realizing that I've stopped halfway up the stairs. "No, you're not. And that's absolutely fine."

No. I'm not letting him talk me out of this.

I step past him, heading to the top of the stairs even as my legs threaten to collapse beneath me. "Which room?"

"Briar—,"

"Which room, Jenson?" God, even my fingers are trembling. He's close behind me, and as I turn, I follow his gaze down to my hands. I snap my traitorous hands into fists, glancing around at the cream walls as if a door will magically appear. "My room?"

The words come out as a rasp. Jenson searches my face for a long, silent moment.

"Turn around," he says finally.

"What?" I feel a little dizzy. As if my lungs aren't filling enough for me to take a full breath.

Jenson steps a little closer. Not enough to touch, but enough that I can feel the warmth of him. "Turn. Around."

I spin, nearly tripping over myself. "I'm *fine*."

"Say that again, and this stops now. Put your hands against the wall."

I just need – a little reassurance. *Something*. I don't know. My hands continue shaking even as I press them against the cream paint in front of me. "Like this?"

"Yes." His voice is close. Too close. And I breathe in sharply as large, warm arms wrap around me from behind.

Jenson pulls me in until my back is pressed to his chest, his hands spread over my stomach. My shaking is more obvious now. "I just —,"

"I know." His voice is a low murmur. "It's alright. Take a breath."

I suck in a shaky breath.

"Good," he whispers in my ear. He's a warm, solid wall behind me. "Again."

I don't know how long we stay there for. With his arms around me, almost holding me up, and my hands out so I don't *touch* him. But it slowly settles something inside me, my body slowly stopping its trembling until I sag back against his chest. "I think I'm okay now."

"One more minute." His cheek brushes my hair. "Just to be sure."

Just to be sure. I tip my head back, carefully resting it against his chest. "Is this... is this okay?"

"I should be asking you that," he mutters. "But yes. This is fine."

Our breathing merges until we're in perfect sync. He holds me steady as if he'd stay there forever.

"I needed this." It's easier to admit when I can't see his face.

"You can lower your hands." The words come out roughly. "Just... slowly. Rest them on top of mine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." He breathes in as I pull my hands in, carefully laying them over his hands on my stomach with a featherlight movement. "That's – that's fine."

Carefully – so carefully – I stroke the very edge of my right thumb over the back of his hand. Jenson's breath stutters.

"Do you still want to do this?" I close my eyes as I ask the question. "Because I do."

"Yes." There's no doubt in his voice, and it steadies me further. "Very much."

"Okay. Can I... turn around? If I keep my hands behind me?"

He stiffens, his lips brushing my hair as he thinks it over. "Alright."

I shift in his arms, his grip tightening as I turn. And his eyes are closed. "Is it mainly hands that bothers you?"

His nod is short. "And kissing."

"Okay," I breathe. I keep my movement slow as I lean forward. "My hands are behind me. I'm not going to touch you with them."

Carefully, I settle my cheek against his chest. His heartbeat thumps against my ear, his palms spreading over my lower back. Holding me against him, even gingerly. "Will you touch my hands? When I'm asleep?"

"I don't intend to leave a single part of you untouched." His throat bobs, his chin brushing the top of my head as if he's looking down at me. "It's not an issue if I know you can't reach for me."

Boundaries. Fears. So many reasons not to do this.

I lean back so I can see his face. Steel-gray eyes blaze down at me.

I want to do this with him. With all of them. I draw back from Jenson, his arms slipping away.

"Show me my room, Jenson."

And this time, my voice doesn't shake at all.

His lip tilts up in the corner. But he doesn't say anything as he turns, leading me to a door directly opposite the top of the stairs that I missed in my panic on the way up. "We put you here. If you want to leave, it's straight down the stairs. The code is on the notepad beside your bed."

My heart turns over inside my chest. "You really thought of every possible angle, didn't you?"

"Tried to." He runs his eyes over my face. "But most of all, I wanted to make sure that the decision is yours. Not pushed because of something we overlooked."

"I know." I know that they want me. But they won't say a word if Jenson walks away, and they find an empty room in the morning. "Are you coming in?"

He shakes his head. "Take some time. There's no rush. We'll be downstairs if you need us."

Nodding, I grip one arm awkwardly. "Goodnight, then?"

"Goodnight, Briar." His fingers lift, a hair's breadth away from touching my face. My lips part in shock, but he doesn't touch my skin, a phantom stroke that lights a fire inside my stomach. "Wear your hair down."

And he's gone, my bag placed in front of the doorway. I watch his back, his fists clenched at his sides as he strides down the stairs without looking back.

The room is exactly how they explained it would be. Directly opposite the doorway is a large, four-poster bed, dark wooden pillars at each corner connected by gathered, gauzy white material. The bed is made up, comfortable-looking pillows and silky sheets in shades of white. A warm amber light casts over them from the lamp next to the bed. The notebook Jensen mentioned is beside it.

I swallow. There's also a glass. And two pills, laid out neatly on a plate.

Biting down on my lip, I scan the rest of the room. Several armchairs sit against the wall to my right, each of them facing the bed, and my body flushes at the idea of them sitting there. Watching me.

It all suddenly feels very... real.

Did you think this was a game, Briar?

The cameras we discussed are clearly visible. One sits in the corner, and the other I find after stepping closer to the bed. The small light blinks at me, meticulously placed to give me a direct view of what happens here tonight.

I'll be able to watch myself losing my own virginity.

It's a weird, if titillating thought. I wonder how many people can say the same.

"Okay," I mutter, placing my hands on my waist. "Let's get this show on the road."

The bathroom is pristine and pretty, a copper bath with deep green tiles covering the walls taking up the majority of the room. It

takes me some time to go through my bag, clean my teeth and freshen up before returning to the bedroom.

River asked if I'd be comfortable wearing something they chose. It's laid out on the bed already, and I stroke my finger over the smooth fabric. The set is a beautiful shade of dark green – not underwear, but more nightwear. Shorts edged with lace, and a matching vest with thin straps.

The silk is weightless against my skin. I cross to stand in front of the gold, full-length mirror, assessing myself. My cheeks are rosy with color, my eyes bright.

I look... exhilarated. Excited. *Alive.*

Reaching up, I unclip my hair, letting it tumble down around my shoulders and combing it out until the tips brush my lower back.

Three things left.

I cross to the door, testing the doorknob. It opens smoothly under my touch, and I close it quickly, careful not to make a noise.

Picking up the water, I take one sip to wet my throat before picking up the tablets.

My choice. This is *my* choice.

"To making choices." I tip my glass in an imaginary toast as I push the tablets into my mouth, chasing them down with the water before I can think twice. "And whatever they may lead to."

Done. It's... done.

And soon, they'll be here.

I slip under the sheets, wriggling until I'm on my back. I test out positions for a few minutes until my churning thoughts begin to slow.

No going back now.

I blink once, my eyelids heavy.

Twice.

And then nothing at all.

JENSON

The three of us exchange glances. It's after eleven.

This is it. Every discussion, every tick on that form, every interaction we've had with Briar has led us here.

But it's still her decision. If the door is locked, we'll retreat, and that will be the end of it.

The end of her, here at Ravenfall with us.

My shoulders tense at the thought. But my fears are unfounded.

She took the medication.

It's my first thought as the doorknob twists beneath my grip. It opens silently, and River and Kai follow me inside.

The three of us spread out without speaking, each of us silently drinking her in. Briar's chest rises and falls in the soft light of the amber glass lamp beside the bed, the glow illuminating the faint sheen of her golden skin against the sheets. The emerald-green silky sleepwear set she's chosen from the selection glimmers like the real thing, offering me yet another image I know I'll be considering often.

I want to see her draped in emeralds and nothing else. In an emerald fucking crown, the jewels nestled against her dark hair.

She looks like a queen, and yet so fucking innocent at the same time. There's a slight rosiness to her cheeks, the room warm enough

that one lithe golden leg is wrapped around the outside of the sheets, already tangled.

My fist curls to stop me reaching out as I take in the way her dark hair fans out against the pillow, silky strands perfectly tousled. Exactly how I imagined her.

Better.

It's an effort to wrest my eyes away, but I look at the camera in the corner of the room. A small red light blinks back at me. Tomorrow morning, she'll wake and watch this back. Watch us, with her.

She has nothing to be concerned about. But the words slip out, wanting to give her that reassurance, remembering that small, whispered worry the first time we met. "You look fucking perfect in our bed, Briar Rose. Better than I could have imagined."

There's a hoarseness to my voice that I didn't expect, and River murmurs his agreement. Even Kai makes a noise, the sound pulled from deep in his throat.

They take the chairs set out, our plans already agreed and shaped by Briar's preferences.

One at a time, for this first time. A little crossover, but not much.

And in this moment, I'm fucking grateful for it. Grateful to be the man who gets to touch her first. I throw a smirk over my shoulder, and River rolls his eyes at me. "Possessive bastard."

Yes. It sends a small slither of worry down my spine, but I shove it away as I approach her. Her skin is warm to the touch, silky smooth as I press my fingers to her pulse and check the steadiness.

"She's alright?"

I nod in response to River's question. Our little acquisition is fine. Her dose was perfectly calculated, her breathing even as I stand over her, debating my options.

She's spread out before me like a buffet. And I get to decide where to start.

I get to touch her however I want, without *fear*. Knowing that no hands will reach for me. No cold lips will press to mine—

My eyes catch on her face, sliding away before they move back. Carefully, I brush my fingers down her cheek. Run them over her

lips, tracing the plumpness before slipping my thumb inside. Her mouth is hot and damp, and my breathing speeds up as I watch my fingers disappear inside before I pull them out and repeat the action.

For the first time, I wonder if perhaps I'd be able to handle Briar kissing me.

But that's not a thought for now.

All the while, she lays there. Unaware. Helpless. Vulnerable.

And in this moment, all fucking mine.

My cock turns to fucking stone, even as the trust she's placed in us threatens to overwhelm me.

We're all here. River and Kai will step in if it looks like I'll break any boundaries, even unintentionally.

I move to the bottom of the bed before climbing on. Taking my time, I nudge her onto her back, listening to her steady breathing as I reach out and run a finger down her throat, between her breasts. Her nipples peak beneath the fabric as I brush the pads of my fingers over them. Hard little nubs, her body betraying her even in sleep.

My groan vibrates against her skin as I lean down and suck one into my mouth through the green silk, running my teeth over it until it's completely stiff and I move to the other.

Moving up, I use my time wisely, exploring every inch of her skin with my lips the way I've thought about for days. Planned out with military precision, not to waste a second, or an inch. The hollow of her throat has the faintest taste of salt, and I drink it down like the greedy fucker I am, my hand sliding down to her hip and gripping the top of her thigh. My hips thrust against the soft barrier of her underwear, and I push onto my knees, sliding my sweatpants down and shifting until I can kick them off onto the floor.

My eyes raise up to the camera as I grip my cock and stroke it. Once, twice, kneeling over Briar like a man ready to worship.

It's easier, with her asleep. The memories stay back as my breathing speeds up, and I tug on the ribbon holding the material in place over her breasts. "Prettiest gift I ever saw."

River groans. "You're killing us."

My smirk grows as I push the green away, her breasts falling easily into my hand as I grip them. Her nipples graze my palm as I run my hands over them reverently, leaning in to brush a kiss over each.

My eyes flick to her face. But she's still sleeping, blissfully unaware as I trail my fingers down her stomach. Lower, pushing the silk down with my hand until soaking wet curls meet my touch.

Heaven.

Briar's warm, wet cunt is heaven under my hands as I spread my palm out, covering her entirely and grounding my palm against her clit.

The small, breathy noise has all of us freezing. My hand stills as she twists her head before settling back down.

I knew it could happen. But having her react to me, to my fucking touch, even in sleep? I tug her underwear down in the next moment, almost tearing it in my impatience as I yank it off and push her legs open.

My lips curl up. "If only you could see what I see. Our Briar has a perfect little pink slit."

I tug on a curl. "And pretty little dark curls."

Two groans are my only response. I don't bother looking over my shoulder, the low sounds and heavy breathing telling me that both River and Kai are working their cocks as they watch us.

Sitting back, I take her in, her legs spread wide and pussy glistening. Every part of her body relaxed.

I haven't been with a woman like this, facing her, since—

I cut the thought off. There's no space for *her* here. Not with Briar occupying every cell, burrowing her way into my chest.

I want her with an urgency that borders on desperation. With a need that pushes me to pin her down, to wrap my hands into that perfect fucking hair and lose myself in her, to give myself to her in a way that I've never permitted any woman to take no matter how much they tried.

Pushing her thighs further apart, I settle down between them, my eyes closing as my cock slides against her entrance. It's not *enough*.

I want to brand her with my touch. Feel every flawless inch of her against me. So I spread myself against her, slowly lowering until my

body is pressed against warm, supple skin. My legs over hers, pinning her down. Her breasts, soft and warm against my stomach. And I twine my hands into hers, pushing them over her head and using my lower arms to brace us both. Revelling in the feel of her fingers entwined with me.

When I look up, the second red light peers back at me, just to the right of her bedside table. Below it, a small microphone picks up my murmured words, so low that even River and Kai don't hear them.

But *she* will.

I drop my head to whisper, knowing she'll hear it tomorrow. "You ever thought I didn't *want* you?"

We're perfectly lined up. My cock throbs, almost painful as I nudge forward, slipping inside just an inch as I inhale sharply.

And then I thrust into her, pushing myself deep into her body – and fuck, but she's so fucking tight. "I can't fucking *sleep* for thinking of you, Briar Rose. Can't eat, can't fucking breathe without you invading my mind. Thinking about this exact moment. How you'd feel stretched around my cock."

I pull out and thrust again, my hands tightening on her wrists. "Even if you were awake right now, I wouldn't let you move. I'd pin you down, just like this, and make you feel every fucking inch of what you do to me."

Again, her body tight and soft and giving beneath me, making my head spin. "You've taken over my fucking head. Once isn't going to be enough—,"

I cut the words off, my throat tightening as I flex my hips, pushing them into her, losing myself in her.

I was already lost to her before I set foot inside this room.

I stare down at Briar's peaceful expression, watching the way she rolls with my movement and almost willing her to wake up. My voice lowers further until it's almost a snarl. "If you woke up right now and pleaded with me to let you go, I wouldn't. Couldn't if I tried. You're a fucking addiction, and you're in my fucking veins."

I can't stop, the admissions spilling out of me as I pin her hips and fuck her pliant, helpless body, my hips rolling against hers. There's no lie in my words. I'm already addicted to her, to the feel of her

body beneath mine, to the sound of her breathing and the faint scent of raspberries in her hair. "Even if you begged, I wouldn't let you go. I'd keep your wrists pinned, just like this, and you'd take every inch of me. I wouldn't stop until you were screaming *my* name."

My pace slows, my release threatening too soon. "I'm not done with you yet. Not nearly. Maybe you'll wake up tomorrow and your wrists will be tied, just like this. And we'll have this conversation again."

One hand releases her wrist, reaching for her thigh and pushing it up, the angle taking me deeper into her body. "Or maybe I'll check the form for body modifications. Because if you *did* check that box, Briar Rose, maybe you'll be waking up with a pretty collar of my name tattooed across your neck after all."

My pulse races at the thought of it. Of my name, branded across her neck for the whole world to see.

Mine.

It's enough to fucking catapult me off the edge. My shout is more of a roar as I thrust once, twice, my release spilling into her pussy and filling it as I pant, trying to drag oxygen into closed lungs even as savage satisfaction floods my veins at the thought of her filled with me.

Leaning on one elbow, I stay buried inside her as I gather up her hair in my fist, looping my hand around it before glancing down at her face. "Next time, I'm going last. And I'm going to prop up your hips with a pillow and leave you full of my cum, so when you wake up I'm still a fucking part of you."

My mouth hovers over hers, dangerously close, before I hesitate.

I nearly did it. Without even thinking. Without the memories surging in.

But I can't. And not just because of Katherine.

She's not mine.

All of this... it's an act. A game that will end when she leaves us.

It has to be.

But it feels like razors in my chest to pull back from her, to unpeel our sticky bodies. Her pussy is swollen and full, my cum leaking out

in sheer perfection, and I take a moment to drag my fingers through. Gathering it up, I reach for her mouth and slide my fingers inside.

A spark of worry lights inside me before her throat works, reflexes kicking in as she swallows. I do it twice more before I glance up to River where he's standing next to me, raising my eyebrow in challenge.

He shakes his head, but there's relief on his face as he takes me in. "Fucking caveman."

Gently pulling my clean fingers from her mouth, I run my hand through Briar's hair one more time, surprisingly reluctant to leave her. "You were right. About this working."

I had no issues with facing her, touching her, lacing my hands with hers. A sleeping, defenceless Briar is no threat to the demons that lurk inside my head.

Taking the warm washcloth from his hand, I clean her up with careful strokes, running my fingers through the tangles of her hair again. "Is there a brush in here?"

"You want to brush her hair?" River grins, but he turns to look. "Look at you, acting all gentlemanly. Almost as if you care about her."

I frown. "It falls under the aftercare section."

And she ticked the box. I wonder if she did it after my frantic call. Petrified that she might cut her hair before I had chance to truly appreciate it.

He tosses me a brush, and I lift Briar until her cheek rests against my shoulder so I can run the thick brush through her dark tangles. "Whatever you say."

I lay her back in the bed, settling the sheets around her so she looks undisturbed. Aside from her flushed cheeks, there's nothing to show what just happened.

Nothing to show I was ever inside her.

And I fucking hate it.

Kai, his eyes lidded as he lounges in the chair, doesn't bother signing. I can read the question well enough. "I'm fine. I'll be back in a minute. Carry on without me."

The door closes behind me, leaving me alone in the hallway before he can respond. Leaning back, I run my hands over my face. I'm not sure I can watch her with someone else and not be a part of it. Not even the men I consider closer than brothers.

Not have her close. Not have her under me, buried inside her. Owning her.

Fuck.

RIVER

The slam of the door is loud in the silent room. Kai's hands are already up. *Give him a minute. He did well.*

Nodding, I look down at Briar. Jenson stripped her underwear from her, leaving her bare and tousled and still blissfully asleep, even after he fucked her like a man possessed.

And he looked at her face while he was doing it.

Held her fingers in his. Hell, he nearly kissed her. Something to consider later. When I don't have a flawless, naked Briar in front of me.

"Fucking hell, Kai," I breathe. "This was a fucking inspired idea."

But only with her. She's the only one who fits here – who I want to think of here, like this. I'm careful as I settle down beside her and prop my head onto my hand, still considering where to start. Her pretty breasts, maybe. Or her lips, plump and the lower one a little too full to be a perfect match for the other.

No.

I get to my knees, carefully dragging the sheet down, baring inch by inch of fucking glorious golden skin. My eyes keep flickering to hers, waiting for a noise, a movement, something that tells me she's aware of what I'm doing.

There's nothing. Only the small huffs of her breathing.

Despite everything – the discussions, the agreement, the back-and-forth, the checks – it feels *wrong*.

I have her permission. Her consent.

But just the thought has my head spinning as I push her legs open and look down, the groan pulled from my throat. "Jenson wasn't exaggerating."

My fingers reach for the thatch of black curls covering her, brushing them. "Get me some scissors."

Kai appears at my shoulder less than a minute later, handing the small pair to me. *I like her curls.*

"I like them too," I murmur, my smile spreading. "Don't panic."

Leaning forward, I roll my finger around one longer curl, and carefully snip it free.

Just one? Kai's eyes are dark when I glance at him, his gaze focused on Briar's cunt as I stretch out and lay the curl on her bedside table. I shrug, not answering.

My own little memento from tonight. A little piece of Briar Rose.

He retreats as I move down, pushing Briar's legs further apart and using my shoulders to hold them in place. There's no tension in her body. Nothing but pure, unaware submission as I look up from between her legs. "You watching this, Briar? Because I'm going to kiss your pretty pussy now. Lick it, and suck on your little clit, and fuck you with my tongue before I bury myself inside you."

My cock is a solid, heavy weight between my legs as I settle in. My hands curve around her thighs, pinning her as I lean in and gently flick my tongue over her clit.

Fuuuuck.

Fuck this. I can't be gentle. Not when I'm fucking *ravenous* for this girl. Have been since the moment I met her. I bury my face in her cunt, licking and tasting and nipping at her until her clit is a swollen bud that I wrap my lips around and carefully suckle. My fingers dig into the soft skin of her thighs, and the approving noises coming from my throat in the otherwise silent room only make me want her more.

I want her to wake up. Want to feel the shocked inhale as she realizes I'm between her legs, my mouth ravaging her cunt. It feels

like a knife edge, a silent challenge that I can't win. My hips pump into the bed, my cock already weeping.

Her thighs are red from my stubble when I pull back, and I run my lips over them in silent apology before sitting upright.

Head tilting to the side, I consider my options. I want her in every possible way. But for now—

She's a soft, warm bundle in my arms as I slip my arm under her back and lift her up. Settling her against me, her head lolling against my shoulder, I spread my thighs wide to take her weight and nudge her onto my cock, using one hand to gently push her down until I'm sheathed inside her and my eyes are rolling back in my head.

One hand stays wrapped around Briar's back, keeping her upright. The other I wrap around the back of her neck, holding her to me as I thrust upward, her legs draped loosely on either side of mine. "Fucking. *Shit.*"

She's so fucking tight as I plunge into her sleeping body, my hold tightening as I pick up my speed until the slapping sound of our skin meeting fills the room.

From this angle, she'll be able to see it all. See her bare back, my arms wrapped around her as I hold her in place. And she'll be able to see my cock disappearing into her pussy, over and over again as I bury my face in her neck and keep thrusting, my body bucking upward.

Leaning forward, I slam my hand against the headboard and use the other to take her full weight. Briar's head tips back, her eyes closed and her hair trailing over my knees as I fucking pound into her, my grunts and the slam of the headboard with my movement filling the air.

I've lived for thirty years without knowing this was waiting for me. And all of it feels like wasted opportunities as I stare at her face before ripping my gaze away.

I need this every fucking day. Morning, noon, night. And I don't give a fuck if she's sleeping or awake. I just need *her*.

My orgasm comes too fucking soon. I'm not ready to leave her yet. But I can't stop it, my guttural cry buried in her neck as my thighs shake and my cum erupts from my cock, shooting into her

pussy in jerking, desperate bursts. My movements gradually slow to gentle rocking motions, my cock softening while it's still inside her.

Maybe Jenson had the right idea.

My eyes slip to the bedside table as I lay her down against the bed, her face turning to the side and her cheek pressed against the pillow. To the dark curl that I stole from her.

"I've taken something of yours," I murmur. "You're going to take something of mine."

I don't even know if Jenson came back, if it was too much for him, or if he's watching as I shamelessly steal his idea and slip my fingers inside her, carefully collecting as much of my release as I can before nudging her lips open and rubbing myself on her tongue. Her lips.

I keep going. Rubbing myself on her body, her nipples, tracing her collarbones and leaving her sticky, unknowingly covered in my cum as I rub it into her skin.

When I'm done, I roll over to lay beside her, my breathing still uneven. It's not from the sex. I could have stayed there all night, as long as I was inside Briar. This feels like something else. A shift in my brain chemistry. An alteration on the molecular level that has my head spinning as I force myself up and into the bathroom, running a clean washcloth under the warm water and trying to pull myself together before I stalk back out.

Kai watches me silently as I clean her up, wiping away the evidence of my time with her. I hate every fucking second of it.

When I'm done, the silence stretches out. I look over to Kai, the frown tugging at my lips. There's no sign of Jenson. "You good?"

He nods. I can see the yearning in his eyes as he grips the arm of the chair, his patience pushed to the limit as he watched both Jenson and I.

Kai has his own plans. Plans that might hurt my chest, if I thought too deeply about it. Nodding, I straighten. "Message if you need us."

I'm going to find Jenson. Something tells me he's ass-deep in alcohol right now, and fuck me if that doesn't sound like an excellent idea.

KAI

I stay where I am for a long time.

Watching. Debating, my breathing harsh in comparison to the sleeping girl on the bed in front of me.

I'm not usually one to hesitate. Out of the three of us, Jenson is the cautious one, the one who treads carefully where River and I tend to fuck things up first and question ourselves later.

I don't want to fuck this up.

I've been watching her for hours. But she still takes my breath away as I stand, stepping silently toward the bed and pausing with my hand gripping the corner post.

The courage it took to do this. To give herself to us, to bare herself in the most vulnerable, physical way a person could offer. To trust us to keep her safe, to keep to our agreement.

I don't know what we did to earn it. But I refuse to squander it.

And tomorrow, she's going to see a little of that vulnerability reflected in all of us. In Jenson's harsh, demanding words as he looked into her face and gave her all of the obsession he tries to hide so desperately. In River's shaking hands as he held her so gently, even after stealing a part of her to keep with him.

And in me. I wonder what she'll see. What she'll take from this. If she'll even get to this point, or if she'll switch off, having seen

enough to reassure her or enough to unnerve her.

My eyes slip to the red light, and away.

My hands move quickly. I don't have the words that the others do. Even with my hands, I'm not able to articulate my thoughts as well as they can – not because of my speech, but because of my own mind. Every thought is tangled up inside my head in jagged knots, only bits and pieces able to slip free.

The mattress bends beneath my knee as I kick off my sweats and climb on, holding my breath as I lean over Briar. My fingers hovering, but not *touching*.

Even as she sleeps, I don't feel quite so alone.

I'm so fucking tired of feeling alone.

Of being ignored completely, or worse, seen as a toy to be played with and tossed aside. I've never been with a woman without that awkwardness. Without the expectation of something I cannot give and being ignored or dismissed when I can't offer it.

And here I am. For the first time in my life, there will be no awkwardness. No uncomfortable. loaded silence. No dismissal, or edged questions about my speech. No swift exit as I'm still catching my breath.

In a world where women look at me like I'm different, as if the blood in my veins is any fucking different to theirs, I will settle for a night with a woman who can't look at me at all. Who I can relax with, play with, *hold* like an actual human being instead of always being left behind for something better.

It's not sex that I crave. It's *connection*.

How fucking pathetic that I feel more of it in this moment than I've experienced in my entire life.

Except for one time. Earlier tonight, in a car with a dark-haired girl who pressed her lips to mine like I mattered.

My fingers trace her skin as if she might break, shatter, disappear beneath my touch. Briar still doesn't feel real to me. As if she might vanish at every moment.

My gaze snags on her mouth, and I swallow before I lean down. The press of my lips to hers is careful, gentle. I brush up and down,

my hand sliding up to cradle her face as I slip my tongue inside and taste her.

That *noise*, deep and a little desperate, sounds in my throat again. I rarely make any sounds at all aside from breathing, too used to keeping quiet. Pulling back, I carefully pull her closer, so we're on our sides facing each other. My hand slips down to her thigh, running over it several times before I breathe in and hitch it, settling her leg over my waist as my arm slips beneath her neck, acting as a pillow.

And my lips meet hers again as I push inside, my breathing erratic and harsh as I roll my hips into hers, steel meeting hot flesh.

She's so... *soft. Everywhere.*

Another noise, as I keep taking her mouth, sucking on her lower lip and gently biting down. And all the while, I keep fucking her.

Although fucking doesn't feel like the right word. My hand is tight around the back of her thigh, holding her against me as the bed dips and moves beneath us. And the way her body moves for me, takes everything from me, *submits* for me... I can't stop my hips from speeding up. I'm gasping into her mouth, her neck, my lips travelling down and teeth dragging over the sensitive skin of her throat as her head tips back and my palm moves to cradle her head.

I sink my teeth in a little deeper, even as I roll, bringing her underneath me as I flex, driving myself into her pussy with increasing speed. The faint banging of the headboard reaches my ears before I slow, carefully dragging my cock free.

It comes out glistening – her own body's reactions or my own excitement, I don't know or care. But I can feel the familiar tingle in my lower spine, deeper and more potent than I've ever felt it, and I glance down to where we're joined. My cock is barely an inch inside her, and I thrust in shallow movements, glancing up to take in her slack face.

It makes something twist inside me. Something darker. Possession, protectiveness, I don't know. Whatever it is, it has me gripped tightly in claws of steel.

I pull out once, rubbing the head of my cock over her pussy, her clit, before I notch it back to her entrance just in time for my climax

to hit like a fucking truck. Throwing my head back, I soak in the feel of my release filling Briar, her legs spread wide as she lays there and takes every single drop. Her pussy is swollen and slick, my cum already leaking from her.

I almost topple on her before catching myself, rolling to the side and bringing her with me until she's sprawled across my chest. Small puffs of breath warm my skin. Staring up at the ceiling, I drink in the feel of her against me, her warm weight a counter to the sudden chill that sweeps across my body.

What if this – us – was too much?

She might bolt tomorrow. Walk away, realizing that this isn't something she wants to continue. And we would have to let her go. I'd have to watch her walk away to whatever she's dealing with in her own life.

Brows drawing down, I press my lips against her head, reaching for the sheets and wrapping them over her bare back. Beneath them, my hands move down her spine in a gentle caress. Over the smooth skin below. Gentle touches to her neck, stroking through her hair, breathing in her scent as I wrap my arms around her and breathe.

Just for a few minutes.

Connection. It's what I wanted from this arrangement, but it's not enough. Not without Briar here with me in full, awake and aware and sleepy and sated. But it's the closest I've ever had.

And I'd take even a small part of Briar Rose over nothing at all.

BRIAR

The light is what wakes me. Stirring, I roll over with a grumble.

But the twinge I feel is what jolts me upright. Awareness isn't a trickle, but a storm that floods my body with energy.

The room is lit with daylight from the large window in the corner, covered with the same gauzy material as the bed around me that still lets the light in.

Blinking, I stare around.

I'm alone. There's no one here, the room looking almost undisturbed from when I went to sleep last night.

But they were here.

I can... I can tell. My body feels strange. Sore. Swollen, aching in a way I've never felt before.

And I'm not wearing the silky green sleep set anymore.

Stumbling out of bed, I wince at another twinge before unsteadily crossing to the mirror.

My hair is a little wild – not especially more than usual. But my lips are slightly swollen. Carefully, I assess myself, my gaze running down my body.

There are marks on my breasts. Small, darkish marks – half a dozen at least, all close to my nipples. Even those feel swollen. As if

A rush of heat floods my face. As if they sucked on them.

Forcing the air in, I continue down until I reach the area between my legs. The redness on my inner thighs stands out the most. Twisting my thigh, I lean in to see before looking down and running my fingers over the patches. They feel a little rough against my touch.

But it's my – my pussy – that feels sore. I cup myself, hissing at the sensitivity.

I *am* swollen. The flesh, normally a paler shade, is darker this morning. Puffier.

They left their marks on me.

Swallowing, I spread myself open and look.

There's no glaring sign. No writing that shouts *Briar lost her virginity to three men last night*.

But my body is letting me know.

I'm definitely not a virgin anymore.

But there's no blood. No trace of it. So maybe... maybe they don't know.

God, please don't let them know.

When I turn, my eyes snag on the dresser in the corner on the other side of the room. On the laptop, perched on top.

I guess I'm going to find out exactly what happened last night.

It takes me an inordinate amount of time to work through the login screen, even with the neat note from River that lets me know the username and password. But then it's easy to work my way to the right file, to click the button as I settle back on the bed, shifting to ease the pain down below.

There are hours of footage. I won't be able to watch all of it, not unless I want to stay in here all day. I skip through the first few hours, where it's only me.

The screen jumps as I press too far, and my mouth drops open. Sound blares from the screen, and I yank the lid down, slamming it closed and cutting the noise off with a panicked bleat.

Slowly, I open it again, only to be greeted with a new page, asking for the password.

Damn it.

But it kicks off directly where I left it. Mouth open, I take in Jenson's body, the way it moves, and thrusts... into *me*.

And he's talking, just like he promised.

I watch for a long time, the pain receding and replaced by something else as I shift in place. Jenson's filthy words. And River – *god*.

My eyes are nearly out of my head. He holds me upright like I'm a feather, my body bouncing vigorously on top of his as he thrusts. And I can see his cock, see it pushing in and out of me. And he watches the camera, looking as if he knows I'm watching, his mouth curling up at the edges.

And his eyes – those dark brown, deep eyes – they look like they're challenging me.

You can't stop me. Look what I'm doing to you.

I slam my knees closed. *No wonder I'm sore.*

There's something truly depraved about just sitting here in the daylight, watching them use me. Their mouths, their cocks. My breathing is unsteady, the soreness fading away underneath a wave of need.

For the first time, the acrid taste of bitterness floods my mouth.

I have no regrets about this. About giving myself to them. It's clear from every moment I watch how much care they took with me, even as they left their marks on my body.

But I wish I'd been awake. A participant, even though the sight of me, unconscious and bare beneath them only stokes that need higher.

I just want... *them*.

Kai lingers at the edge of the bed for a long time, watching me. My heart leaps into my mouth as he lifts his hands, and my eyes prick.

I'm going to take care of you.

He's so gentle, every touch a caress. But there's a moment that he loses control, and my fingers trail down as I watch the screen.

I couldn't—

I can.

I stroke my fingers over my heated, swollen pussy, even that light touch enough to make me shudder. I'm soaking, and I find my clit, rubbing it in increasingly frantic circles as I match Kai's pace where he's pounding into me on the screen.

When he slows, I do the same, even though that need is nowhere near fulfilled.

But I want to see.

Kai lays down beside me, wrapping his arms around me, nuzzling into my neck, his lips tracing my skin. And understanding threatens to break my heart as I pull my hands away, the feeling fading as I watch. He stays with me for a long time.

Except I'm not sure it's for my benefit. Not completely.

I know what he wanted from this. From me.

I wonder if he got it.

RIVER

Kai slides me another coffee. Both of us look as bad as each other – dark-eyed, shambolic messes, both of us shirtless and exhausted. I didn't get any sleep, and I doubt he did either. Dark stubble he normally shaves off is creeping through on his face.

I haven't seen Jenson at all this morning.

You think she's watching?

I nod in response to Kai's question. She might be up there now, watching us with her. Setting down my coffee, I scrub my face with both hands, sending up a silent prayer that she's alright to whatever deity will spare a thought for a fucked-up man with no morals.

Because I want to do it again.

And I want her awake. Those eyes watching me, her voice filling my ears as I buck into her.

One night wasn't enough. Three nights definitely won't be.

The creak from outside the door makes both of us startle, before it swings open. The coffee in my hand slips, and I swear as scalding liquid spills out, spilling onto my thigh and making me hiss even through my dark blue jeans. "Fucking hell."

"River?" Briar darts past a gaping Kai, who clearly can't work out whether to laugh or not as she pokes at my thigh. "Did it burn you?"

"No," I croak. "I'm good. Just a – a little stiff."

Kai chokes. Briar pulls back, and I drink her in. She doesn't look psychologically damaged. "Forget about me. Good morning."

It's as though she suddenly realises, flushing lightly. She sinks her teeth into her lower lip before she backs up, glancing between me and Kai. "Hi."

I watch in confusion as she gives Kai a long, indecipherable look. His eyes widen in what might be panic, especially as Briar walks up to him. His eyes meet mine, and I sign frantically.

What did you do?

I can't see her expression. Only her back as she lifts up her hands. But whatever she says has the terror leaching from his expression, replaced by something... else.

He holds out his arms, and my mouth falls open as she launches herself into them and wraps her arms around his neck where he sits on the stool. He grips her tightly, burying his face into her neck. It looks as if he's breathing her in like freaking oxygen.

It feels... private. So much so that I turn to stare at the wall by accident in my confusion, instead of somewhere logical. *Have we always had that darker patch?*

The delicate cough has me turning. "Did you... how are you feeling? Are you alright?"

I take a step closer now she's unwrapped herself from a still dazed-looking Kai, inspecting her without bothering to hide it.

Briar leans against the counter, glancing up at me from beneath long lashes. "I'm okay. A little sore."

My frown has her stopping. "How sore?"

She glances away, but I carefully hold her chin, ducking down to get a proper look at her face. "Briar. Tell me."

God, it feels too easy to touch her. And I shouldn't, really, not outside of the agreement.

But she can tell me to back off. The agreement is for when she's asleep.

She shifts beneath my touch, but she doesn't pull away. "A bit. But I expected it. It's okay."

"No, it's not." The words are a rumble as I glance over my shoulder to Kai. "There's gel in her bathroom."

Nodding, he slips from the room as Briar's eyes widen. "There is?"

I can't help the smirk that tips up the corner of my mouth as I lean in. "There is. It will help. I distinctly remember smoothing it over your pussy last night."

Her mouth falls open. "River!"

I love her shyness. Fucking adore it, in fact. Leaning in, I murmur in her ear, delighting in the way she shivers against me. "Did you enjoy your home movie?"

Her lips brush my cheek as she turns. "Yes."

I stay exactly where I am. The question in my mind sneaks out through my fucking mouth. "Did you touch yourself?"

Fucking. Hell. I need to slow down. But I can't get rid of the thought inside my head, of Briar watching us, her fingers rubbing—

"Yes." The small admission cuts through my thoughts and pulls an audible groan from my throat. "But—,"

I yank my face back to study hers. "But?"

She swallows, her eyes slipping to Kai as he appears at my side. Kai glances between the two of us as he holds the gel out and I take it. "Our sweet little Briar touched herself this morning, Kai. Did you know that? While she was watching us buried inside her pussy, she was playing with it."

He stills beside me.

"But she didn't get to finish." I tilt my head. "Why not, baby?"

If she was blushing before, she's a deep shade of scarlet now. "I... I was sore?"

I tap the gel on my hand, considering.

Jenson is going to fucking kill me.

But the agreement is for three nights. Anything else outside of that is for us to decide.

Leaning forward, I tap the counter behind her. "Jump up."

"What?" Her head nearly spins to look behind her. "What for?"

I hold the gel up, grinning. "It's not like I haven't done it before. I wouldn't be very good at aftercare if I left you in pain. I know what you need."

And all jokes aside, she's getting this gel on her one way or another. No fucking way am I allowing her to walk around with a

swollen, sore pussy.

Or... a little flicker of satisfaction runs through me. Not completely, anyway.

Her eyes flick from me to the gel.

Play with me, Briar.

She bites down on her lip. "Seems like you should have fixed it the first time then, no?"

Even Kai huffs his amusement, and my smile lights up like I'm a fucking Christmas tree.

Fuck, yes. "Fair point. In that case – why don't I kiss it better as an apology, and we'll put the gel on after?"

The look on her face is a combination of shock and sheer, naked longing. I have to cross my arms to stop myself reaching for her. My next words are smug. "Seems to me like I know *exactly* what you need."

I lean forward until I'm less than an inch away from her lips. She licks them nervously as I tap the counter again, this time making an audible sound. "Up you get."

This is more fun than I've had in years. Maybe ever.

Another little hint of what sits beneath that shyness peeks out when she raises one eyebrow at me. I'm getting ready to say fuck it and just toss her up when she lifts up her arms in silent request.

"Good girl." I wrap my arms around her waist and lift her easily, settling her down on the cool island. "Kai?"

He's already on it, grabbing his hoodie from the back of his stool and rounding the island as I set my hand on her stomach and nudge her down. Kai bundles his hoodie, using it as a makeshift pillow for her head as she settles back.

Awake, and more than fucking aware of what happens next.

Whichever god listened to me the first time, please keep Jenson wherever he is for at least the next thirty minutes. And thank you to previous iterations of me for whatever the fuck I did in a previous life to deserve this.

"Kai." My mouth curves. "Hold onto her hands, would you?"

She gasps as his hands wrap around hers. He presses a kiss to her palm, but doesn't let go.

"My, my." My fucking mouth is watering. "Are these stockings?"

They are. Sleek black stockings with a fucking glorious dark line up the back. I slide my hands up them. "Spread, baby."

The moniker falls from my lips almost as naturally as Briar follows my instructions, her legs falling open. Both her and Kai watch as I investigate what she's wearing under her knee-length, woollen navy dress. "River, I—,"

My head pops up. "Didn't feel like wearing any underwear today?"

She shakes her head slowly. "Sore, remember?"

"Hmmm." I investigate, rolling up her dress under it's over her hips. I lift them easily, dragging the material beneath to leave her completely open to me.

Fuck. She does look sore. "We had a lot of fun with your pussy last night. Maybe too much."

And the marks on her thighs are definitely from my fucking stubble.

I carefully stroke up her slit, and she makes a tiny little noise. "But you're all wet, Briar. Did you get yourself worked up, watching us?"

She nods silently as I watch her face, her green eyes focused on mine. "Do you want me to use my mouth on you? And I want to hear you say it. If you're too sore, we can wait."

She shakes her head, and I raise my eyebrows in silent admonishment. "No. I want you to use your mouth. Please."

She doesn't have to ask me twice.

It takes a second to lift her thighs and hook them over my shoulders, spreading her nice and wide for me. The first touch of my tongue is gentle. Testing. But her cry is music to my ears as I trace the softest circle around her clit. "River!"

"Keep saying my name." My demand is muffled by my reluctance to put any distance between me and Briar's sweet little cunt. "Keep talking, Briar."

She moves beneath me, and I grip hold of the dimples in her hips, sinking my fingers into them. This is... I thought she was perfect last night.

Nothing tops this. She moans and bucks beneath me as I drag my tongue over her, over and over again. She's so wet that my lower

face is fucking covered, and I relish every bit of it as she pushes herself into me. "Fuck, you're so greedy."

"River," she pants. "*More.*"

I wrap my lips around her already swollen clit, sucking on it in harsh, unapologetic movements. Her thighs clamp around my head, my hold on her hips tightening until her ass isn't touching the counter anymore, my face fucking buried in her.

This is exactly how I want to be buried. I could die happy, as long as I had the taste of her pussy in my mouth.

She rocks against me, pleading, repeating the words over and over again. But Kai keeps her steady, and I switch to plunging my tongue inside her, mimicking how my cock moved inside her last night. My hips thrust against the counter in time with my movements, my muffled groans and her cries mixing to create a truly beautiful symphony.

The familiar ache, that building intensity, tingles, and I push my face into her as my hips pump faster.

Fucking hell – I'm going to—

She *screams*, her back arching as her cunt floods my mouth...and I erupt inside my fucking *jeans* with a muffled roar.

I think it might be the best damn orgasm I've ever had. I feel fucking dizzy as Briar's cries turn to throaty, pleading sounds. "Please, River – it's so—,"

I yank my face away immediately. Too sensitive. *She was already hurting, you fucking jackass.* "Briar?"

Kai gives me an incredulous, *what the actual fuck* look, their hands still entwined. I stare him out, very aware that only my position at the counter is hiding the fact that I came in my jeans like a teenage boy on his first time. "Briar, baby. Talk to me."

Her panting breaths fill the room. "Good. I'm... that was... that was good. I think."

"You *think*?" My voice is incredulous. I *think* that my cock just shrunk three sizes. "You screamed my name loud enough to take out a window."

I came in my fucking jeans.

Fuck it. Maybe Kai won't notice. I shuffle around the counter until I can lean over her face. She blinks up at me. "I don't have that much to compare it to."

"You've never done that before?" My brow furrows. "Ever?"

I'm learning her tells. Her face flushes a deep red, from her forehead all the way down to where her neckline shows a hint of her curved breast. Her eyes skate from mine, darting around the room. "No?"

As I stare at her, a suspicion sneaks into my head.

I push it away. *No*. There's no way. No fucking way.

We would have noticed. Jenson – me – alright, maybe not Kai – but we would have known.

Leaving it for a moment, I grab a fresh towel from the floor and gently dab at her. She winces. "It didn't feel like this when you were touching it."

The wonders of an impending orgasm.

But she seems so... fucking *innocent*. I watch her carefully as I reach for the gel.

She moans as I smooth it over her carefully. "It's cool."

One side of my mouth lifts. "It's called cooling gel for a reason. Feels good?"

She makes a plaintive noise. Her eyes are closed. "Much better."

"It works well," I say carefully. Praying that I'm wrong. "Especially when you've never had sex before. Is it working for you?"

She sighs. It almost sounds like she's ready to go back to sleep. "Definitely. I feel better now."

My fingers stop what they're doing. Kai stiffens, his face lifting and dawning horror creasing his features. He pulls his hands free. *What?*

And Briar's whole body locks up. "Wait. River—,"

Just to top it off, a furious voice rings out from behind me. "What the hell is going on?"

Maybe the gods don't like me after all.

BRIAR

I jolt upright, the bliss of a moment ago ripped away in sheer, terrifying fear.

No. "I can explain."

I'm yanking my dress down, my eyes prickling when Jenson pushes River aside. "You lied to me."

"Jenson." I try to find the words, but I'm struggling to even take a breath. "I didn't – it wasn't—,"

His face is cold. So cold. "I asked you. I asked you if you were a virgin. I told you that it would be a dealbreaker for us. And you *lied*."

He leans in, and I shrink back. "Tell me what part of that sentence I have wrong, Briar. Please."

And his eyes – there's no burning in them. No softness. Only ice.

"Jenson," River says quietly. He appears at his shoulder, his eyes shifting to mine. "Take it easy. The only person this affects is her."

"No." He's almost vibrating, his words quiet and all the more vicious for it, and my eyes start to burn. "You trusted us. But we trusted you. I trusted you with my family. I told you what our boundaries were. That was one of *mine*, Briar, and you broke it before we even started."

"I'm sorry." It comes out as a choked cry. "I just... just—,"

"Just *what*?"

The tears spill over at that awful, cold tone. "I wanted it to be someone I chose. I wanted it to be *you*. I didn't want it to be – someone else."

I can't breathe. The sobs choke my throat, close it off, and the tears blur the sight of Jenson's furious face. "I'm sorry. I'll go."

"No." River's voice is hard. "You won't, Briar. Not like this."

And warm arms slide beneath me, lifting me. I swipe at my eyes as Kai pulls me away, twisting until he sets me on my feet, blocking my view of Jenson. *It will be alright. I have you.*

I'm sorry. I struggle to remember the sigs, to make my hands move the right way. *For the lies. I didn't mean to.*

His hands close over mine gently, stopping me. *It is not the end of the world. You made your choice.*

His warm blue eyes have my own leaking again. He brushes his knuckle against my cheek before he turns, his hands flying with movement.

They're arguing. Because of me.

I really messed up.

The Jenson who wrapped his arms around me, who teased me about tattoos and told me my hair was beautiful – there's no sign of him when I take a breath and step out from beside Kai. "Please don't argue. I'm going to leave now."

My breath shudders in my chest, jagged and painful, and I shake my head at River when he opens his mouth. "I have to get home."

I'm already later than I told my father I would be. I might even have missed the fitting.

I glance up at Kai. "Will you—,"

He's already nodding. *Go and get your things. I need to speak to J.*

Don't argue for me. This is my fault.

You made a choice. His face falls slightly, as if in realization. His movements slow. *You didn't feel you had a choice.*

I turn to face him completely at that, signing something quickly that softens his expression before I spin.

I pause in front of Jenson, not sure what to say. Not sure I can say anything.

So I sign it instead, the words and pain closing my throat. To him, and to River, both of them watching me. I give them the same words I gave Kai, and another apology.

I would have chosen you. I'm sorry for the lie. If you don't want to see me again, I understand.

Jenson jerks, but I'm already moving past him, careful not to touch him before I push the door open.

"Briar." River's voice is desperate. "Please. This is not the end of the world, sweetheart. Don't leave like this."

I pause. Just for a moment. Just in case.

But Jenson doesn't say anything.

I can't. Not without making more of a fool of myself, and I shake my head, slipping through the doorway and leaving silence behind.

It closes behind me. And it feels like the ending of something.

Something that almost felt perfect.

JENSON

The kitchen is full of anger.

River pushes in front of me. "You're seriously going to let her leave like this?"

Anger still has my throat in a chokehold. But it's not just anger. There's something else – something cloying, and heavy. It feels like shame. "This was never going to last. Temporary. Perhaps it's for the best—,"

The shove to my chest takes me by surprise, and I stagger back.

"*Bullshit.*" River roars the word. "For years, I have stood by and watched you self-destruct, Jenson. You can blame your father and Katherine all you fucking want – and if I could go back, I'd do *anything* to change it – but this is a chance to get it right. She is your chance, and you're the one who's going to blow it. Hell, maybe you just did."

"We barely even know her." The coldness comes so easily. Blissfully numbing. "And she lied."

"She gave us her fucking virginity," River snaps. "Not a contagious disease. She's up there alone and upset. And you're acting like she's —,"

He doesn't say it. *Like she's Katherine.*

Except I'm the one who feels like Katherine right now. The thought makes my palms sweat.

To my surprise, Kai pushes River out the way, his hands moving furiously. *She was scared to tell us. And you just proved her right.*

"You don't know," I snap at him. "I *asked* her. To her face, Kai. You think I'd react like this otherwise?"

And you told her this wouldn't happen. That the arrangement wouldn't happen.

"Yes."

I don't understand why they're not angry too.

She gave us something she can't take back. Gave *me* something, since I was the first to push inside her. And even the thought makes me feel physically sick. The way I thrust inside, not caring, not checking—

The nausea surges, and my jaw tightens as I fight to keep it back. Not to run to the sink and purge my stomach. "She'll be fine. She'll go back to her pampered life, and she'll be fine."

River stares at me. "And you'd be fine with that? Never seeing her again?"

I don't answer.

I have to go. But you don't know anything about her life.

"And you do?" I find the words again. "What exactly do you know?"

I know she's scared of something. She wanted to feel safe. To make her own choice. She's never had a choice either. But she chose us. And you just ruined it for her.

River and I both stare. He recovers first. "What the fuck do you mean, she's not *safe*?"

Kai looks frustrated. *Not like that. I don't know everything. But something isn't right. She doesn't feel safe.*

"But she wanted to go." My chest feels heavy. "Take her home, Kai. She wants to go home."

We have always had a different dynamic, Kai and I. More like siblings than friends, a consequence of our childhoods. Kai has always felt like my younger brother. But the disappointment in his eyes makes *me* feel like a child.

He signs once more before he disappears. *She wanted to stay. But you didn't ask her to.*

"You are my best friend," River says heavily. "But your demons are drowning you, Jenson. They're drowning all of us. And you can't even see the life jacket in front of you."

He stops in front of me. And his words... they're on the verge of begging. "You're so desperate not to be *him*. Be careful, Jens. Because this icy shield of yours that you put on? This refusal to care about anyone, to care if you hurt someone? That's all *her*. If you're not careful, that shield is going to become real and none of us will be on your side of it."

The door slams shut behind him.

Within seconds, I'm emptying the contents of my stomach into the sink. When I turn, wiping my hand over my mouth, I pause.

Kai picks up his keys, shoving them into his pocket. *You fixed me, you know. When you found me. Even when I didn't want you to.*

His throat bobs.

But I can't fix you. And it's killing me.

He's gone before I can summon up the words to respond.

BRIAR

I stand on my doorstep for a long time.

I can feel Kai's eyes on my back. He's still parked up. Waiting, in case I turn around and go back.

He asked me to. Asked me not to go, even as I brushed him off and climbed out of the car, clutching my bag.

My heart hurts in a way I never anticipated when we first started this.

Because they matter to me. Kai. River. And – and Jenson. Jenson's opinion of me *matters*.

And I hurt him. I could see it, through the mask of anger.

He let me in. Let me *touch* him. And something about what I've done hurt him, far more deeply than I ever considered.

Maybe I'm more like my father than I ever realised, forcing my decisions on other people without any thought to their own needs.

I'm late. So, so late. I told my father I'd be back by mid-morning, and it's well into the afternoon.

The tall clock in our hallway chimes as I push the door open. And the voice floats through the open living room door.

"In here, Briar."

I run a hand over my hair, tug down my dress and smooth away the wrinkles. It feels like preparing for battle.

My face is smooth as I walk in. "I'm sorry, Papa. This morning's fitting took longer than I expected."

My father is sitting in his chair. I haven't seen him in here for a long time. Months. Maybe longer.

I've barely seen him at all, in fact.

He points to the tall-backed, uncomfortable, pristine white couch that I've always despised. "Sit."

The silence stretches out.

"You missed the fitting. I've rearranged it for next week."

I smooth over my knees. "There's no need."

His attention sharpens as I look up, squaring my shoulders. "I'm not marrying Philip. I've made my decision. I appreciate your concern over my future, but I will work it out, the same way that everyone else has to."

"I see." He studies me, his voice even. "And what will you do?"

"I'll make the store work. And if I can't, I'll get a job."

He laughs at me. A cruel, sharp laugh that I've never heard from him before. "Will you, now?"

Don't let him wear you down.

My voice remains steady. "You gave me an excellent education. I speak Spanish, German, Korean and ASL almost fluently, and I'm highly organised. I'll find something. I don't particularly care what, as long as I can live on it."

"Pity that education didn't give you a brain worth a damn." The brutal comment makes me stiffen. "You will be marrying Philip. Have your tantrum, Briar. But you will marry him, and soon. You're attending a dinner with him next week. After that, you'll wear the ring he gives you, and you will smile, and nod, and you will do exactly what I *fucking* tell you to do."

He's never spoken to me like that before. The ground on which my whole life is built shifts beneath my feet. "And if I refuse? You can't *force* me."

My father looks down. "The firm will fold without Philip's investment, you know. We're barely keeping things afloat."

It takes me a moment. "*What?*"

"Everything will go." He suddenly looks older than I've ever seen him. "The house. The car. Everything I've ever worked for. *We* – not just me – will lose everything, Briar. And soon, if something doesn't change. Within weeks, if I can make it that far. And then we'll see how you survive without all of the luxuries you've grown up with."

My heart thuds. I'm not worried about myself. But my father – his firm is his *life*. It has been for as long as I can remember. "But Philip is going to be partner. That's always been the plan. So his investment will keep things running, right?"

"He has conditions. Or *one* condition. And he is running out of patience."

I shake my head. "You can't be serious."

"At least go to the dinner, Briar," my father says heavily. "Please. If I have more time – maybe I can work something out. Fix this. You can do this one thing for me."

I take a deep breath. "Fine. But I won't lie to him. I won't pretend, not if it comes up."

"Do what you want." My father stands. "I have enough to consider."

He leaves me alone as he walks out without another word, my body frozen against the couch.

That's why he wants me to marry Philip so desperately. Not for my comfort at all. It has nothing to do with my childhood, just a convenient excuse to keep me close, to maintain the lie that he's worried about me while he tries to get the best *price*.

I'm just another negotiation.

My heart aches as I slowly climb the stairs to my bedroom. My body throbs from last night, and I sit down on the edge of my bed, opening up my hands and staring at them.

My virginity and my naivety, both stripped away on the same day. How poetic.

And I don't know what to do now. The memory of Jensen's face, twisted with pain, stays in my mind as I crawl into bed and wrap my body around a pillow, hugging it tightly.

It hurts so much more than my father's icy revelation.

We're going to lose everything.

The room around me that I've slept in my entire life will be gone. Heart pounding, I roll onto my back and stare up at the ceiling.

I could save it.

All I would have to do is marry a man I don't care for. For the first time, I allow myself to truly consider it, instead of skating around the idea in my mind.

I've never been to his home, but I've seen pictures of the townhouse I would move into. It looks... cold. White walls, white furniture. Not unlike mine, but it looks unlived in.

There's no life there. I'd be expected to keep it exactly as it is. Maintain it, without changing it. And become the same. Pristine perfection. Silent and obedient, my head lowered.

And I would share his bed. I consider that too. Compare it to the images I watched this morning. The way that they made me feel. Revulsion tightens my chest at the idea of having Philip that close to me. Touching me.

They might not want you anymore.

My face crumples at the thought. I wouldn't blame them. I broke the agreement, after all our conversations about trust. And if they don't want me... I can't imagine meeting anyone else like them. Not ever.

So maybe it doesn't matter if it's Philip. Not when I can't imagine anyone ever matching up to them anyway. At least this way, my father would get to keep everything he's worked for.

The thought lingers.

BRIAR

The haughty seamstress raises an eyebrow at me. "We do know what we're doing."

"Of course. I didn't mean to imply otherwise." Our living room has been transformed; the coffee table pushed aside to make way for the platform that I'm standing on as several women work around me. "I just thought it would be measurements only."

The white lace feels too tight against my stomach. I suck in a breath as it's pulled tighter. "I need to be able to breathe."

The seamstress lets out a disapproving tut before moving on to my hips. "Your fiancé has very specific tastes."

He chose my wedding dress. Without *speaking* to me.

"There." The woman steps back, pointing at the mirror. "You make a beautiful bride."

The others murmur in agreement. This dress is nothing like I would have chosen for myself. It's too tight, the lace clinging to me all the way down my body, from the low-cut corset until it flares out close to my ankles in a long, ostentatious train that almost stretches the full length of the room.

I always thought I would make my own wedding dress. Something out of a fairytale. Pretty, with long sleeves that tapered on the ends,

and a swishing, flowing skirt. Something that made me feel like a princess, instead of a prisoner.

But then, this is not the wedding I dreamt about.

I drop my gaze from the woman in the mirror.

I've heard from Kai every day. Small, sweet messages. River has left voicemails on my phone, his coaxing words almost enough to make me smile.

But I've heard nothing from Jenson, and his silence speaks loudest.

I jolt as they place the ivory veil on my head. It drops down to nearly my toes, heavy and thick. An unpleasant, musty scent fills my nose.

"It belonged to your mother-in-law." The words barely make it through the fabric. "She insisted that it should be given to you."

Oh, God. *Doreen.*

My breathing feels louder as the noise of the room is cut off. Harsh, and a little panicky. I start to feel a little light-headed. "Could you take it off, please?"

They're not listening. They don't see me at all, only here to carry out whatever instructions Philip has clearly given them. "I can't- take it off—,"

I can't breathe. My hands reach up to wrestle with the veil, trying to pull it off. My words grow louder, more pleading, as I tangle with the material.

Take it off.

Take it off.

Take it off.

There's a tearing sound as blissful, cool air fills my lungs. My body folds, but I can't even bend over in this gown.

Horried murmurs burst around me, and I glance down. Dread curdles my stomach at the large tear in the veil. "I didn't mean – I couldn't breathe."

I still can't.

Silence. The quiet curse from the seamstress echoes my own thoughts. "Mrs Fitzherbert will not be happy about this."

It almost sounds like a warning.

Sighing, I glance at myself in the mirror again. "No, she won't."

"I understand there was an issue at the fitting."

My father studies me as I push the chicken around my plate. I can feel his disapproval from the other end of the long table. "You'll need to call to apologize."

"I already have." Doreen Fitzherbert is *not* happy with me. But the guilt I feel is genuine. "It was an accident. The seamstress is repairing it."

As if it never happened.

"Good."

I set my fork down. "I know you want me to be comfortable, Papa. But does it matter to you if I'm happy?"

My father doesn't respond for a moment. "Happiness is subjective, Briar. Safety, and security – that is what truly matters. I struggle to see how anyone can find happiness without it. If someone does not feel safe, how can they possibly be happy? Philip is offering both of those things. Happiness will follow."

I consider his words as he continues eating. My father is referring to materialistic things. That's how he views it – as he has always viewed it. The house around me has always mattered more in his mind than what was inside it.

Not everyone sees safety in the same way.

His last sentence echoes in my head.

If someone does not feel safe, how can they possibly be happy?

I glance at the clock. It's still early evening.

And it's Wednesday.

My lips tilt up at the edges. I have an invitation this evening. From a small, possibly psychotic but rather sweet bartender who might get me horrifically drunk.

Maybe I haven't heard from Jenson.

But that doesn't have to stop me visiting Mystic.

JENSON

"Good takings tonight." River slips into the empty seat beside me. I've commandeered a table close to the ring. All the better to glare disapprovingly at Kai. "It's busy."

Three fucking fights so far. "Great."

River taps his fingers on the table in a pattern. "You don't care about any of this shit, do you? You never did."

Frowning, I twist to look at him. A roar rings out around me as Kai's fist meets flesh. "What the fuck does that mean?"

It's all I've ever cared about.

River doesn't look at me. "You built this place back up because you thought you had to. For me. For Kai. To keep us safe, give us a life. And fucking hell, Jenson. You've more than done it."

He meets my gaze then, his own steady. "You rebuilt the Diamonds from the ashes of your father's shitty choices. But you don't enjoy any of it, Jenson. You get far more pleasure from the regeneration work you do in the city than anything to do with the politics."

I've shredded my soul for fifteen years, trying to hold us together.

"I had to build it back up." I stare at him. "My father fucked it all, River. You know more than anyone else. We were on our own, we had Kai to consider—,"

"But did you want to?" My best friend's eyes are disturbingly focused. "Or was it about trying to make sure it would never happen again?"

"I don't understand." My head shakes. "Where the hell has this come from?"

River shrugs. "I've been doing some thinking the last few days. About what I want."

Since Briar left.

Throat tightening, I avoid his gaze. "And what did you decide?"

River looks around him. "I love Mystic. You know that. But everything else... I could leave that behind, Jens. I'm tired of putting on a façade that this is who we are."

He stands. "I don't think you want this anymore. Hell, I don't think you ever did. You thought you had to, for us. To protect us. So nobody would hurt Kai again. So nobody could hurt *you* again. But we're telling you that we can see through it. Try thinking about what you need, for a change. We don't need protecting anymore."

His voice lowers. "She's shaken up your world view, Jenson. But maybe it needed a little shaking. Isn't it time you were finally happy?"

He walks away, jumping up and ducking under the ropes as Kai knocks out his third opponent. And I sink back into my seat.

When was the last time I felt anything close to happiness?

BRIAR

My mouth is open as I watch Dove. She flails beside me, and a man staggers back with his hand over his pants as I wince.

She beams, her voice carrying over the music. "This is fun!"

It is fun. We've been dancing for over an hour, any shyness I might have felt helped along by one of Dove's new creations. This one is a bright, sparkling pink.

I don't give a shit.

It feels kind of appropriate. My head feels like it's buzzing.

Maybe I won't have any more.

I point to the bar, making my way through the crowd until I can ask for some bottled water. Shouting behind me has me turning my head. "What's through that door?"

I don't remember seeing it last time I was here. But there's a steady flow of people streaming inside.

The guy serving me hands me my bottle, and I press it to my heated cheeks. "The fighting. You can go through if you want to."

"Thanks."

Frowning, I glance around. There's no sign of Dove. I wait a few minutes before walking around the dance floor, in case she's in the bathroom.

Maybe she's next door. I join the stream of people, stepping through the small entrance and looking around. The walls are black, the room lit by electric sconces set at regular intervals around the four square walls. People are jostling for some of the small circular tables, but most are clustered around the large ring in the middle of the room. It's raised, the gray-looking square floor surrounded by thick blue and red ropes.

Wide-eyed, I stare as one man throws himself into another. Their fists fly, neither of them wearing any protective equipment as they grapple. Nausea surges as I see a thick spray of scarlet fly out, spattering against the floor. The bigger man follows it down, his head banging against the solid floor with a thud that makes me feel ill.

I don't like this. I glance around quickly for Dove, trying to spot her. This place feels more... dangerous. Edgy, maybe. As if a fight could break out at any moment, and not just in the ring.

Sighing, I'm about to head back into the club when my eyes lock on a blond head. River's golden hair is back in his usual bun as he leans forward on a table, his blazer sleeves pushed up past his elbows and his expression intense. He gestures before spinning and walking up to the ring.

Jenson stares after him. I can't read his expression, so I edge to the wall on my left, shifting down the room.

He's watching the ring. My eyes follow, and—

Kai.

Kai is in the ring. Bouncing on bare feet, with River murmuring in his ear. I didn't look too closely the first time, but he's the one that was fighting.

And it's clear that he's about to fight again.

I stay where I am, my heart in my mouth. He moves like water. Sleek, fast and with an elegance that makes it look as if he's almost dancing.

I didn't know he could fight.

The people here love him, cheering for him, calling his name. But he doesn't acknowledge them at all. He doesn't smile, even as he

wins this match too. His expression is blank, his mouth turned down slightly at the edges.

And his eyes look... *empty*.

My eyes travel down, and my heart stops. There are *scars* across his chest. Thick, raised scars that his tattoos don't quite manage to hide.

Two women move into the small space next to me, clutching their drinks. One of them is giggling. "I don't believe you."

"It's true! Last year." The second woman, maybe a little older than me, has curly brown hair and slicked red lips that pull up into a smirk. I glance away before she sees me looking. "Try anything once, right? I mean, wouldn't you?"

"What was he like? I bet he was great. I mean, look at him."

"Oh, yeah." Hair whips against the side of my face. "But he wanted me to stay with him afterwards. Like... why? What was I supposed to do? He doesn't even *talk*. It was fucking awkward. Pretty, but nothing much there, you know? There's a table over there."

Anger tightens every part of my body, leaving me shaking as they push off the wall and past me. The way that woman spoke about him – like he was a *thing*, to be used and thrown aside—

The back of my eyes feel hot as I sweep the room again. It looks different, this time. As if Kai is a toy, to wind up and go again and again for the entertainment of the people in this room.

No good for anything *real*.

The man facing him is huge. Thick rings of muscle wrap around his middle, his arms, his wide neck. And Kai looks... tired. Drained.

He's fighting *again*.

He wins the first round, retreating to where River is waiting in the corner. But he shakes his head, moving back out to the middle.

His movements are slower.

River is shaking his head as he climbs down. I watch as he moves through the crowd. He doesn't see me pressed against the wall as he strides back through the door to Mystic, and I return to Kai.

The thick fist smashes into his cheek, sending his whole body twisting as he flies back and hits the floor.

No.

No more.

Kai

The crowd roars at the spray of blood that splatters across the concrete floor. My opponent, a guy with more muscle than brain, staggers before he drops down to one knee.

I don't even need to hit him again. Not really.

There are no rules in this ring, aside from those limiting permanent disfigurement or death. So when I spin around, my foot slamming into him and sending him flying back into the ropes, the crowd only chants for more.

A screaming, frenzied mass. It's fucking wild in here tonight. I'm already on my third fight, and the crowd keeps swelling.

River tosses me a bottle of water as I head to the corner, wiping my face off with the towel he hands me next. "Kai."

Another guy ducks under the rope as my last opponent is dragged off, but River grabs my arm. "Enough. I'm barely holding him together. You're getting tired. All it takes is one hit and he's going to lose his shit."

He's not wrong. But the crowd is chanting my name. A group like this can turn on a fucking dime, and this isn't the space for a mass brawl. We don't have the men to manage it, for starters.

And another fight could double our takings for the night, between the betting and the drinks. Shaking my head, I brush River off. *One*

more and I'm done.

I doubt I'd have another one in me anyway. He groans behind me. "I'm going back to the bar."

But I'm already striding to the middle, bouncing lightly on my feet as I check my wraps. I glance up, catching sight of Jenson among the horde, sitting at a table with his arms crossed.

He doesn't look happy. He glares at me. *Get out of there.*

I shrug. *I want to do one more.*

His irritation is better than the numb expression he's been walking around with since I took Briar home.

Five days since I've seen her. Since any of us have seen her.

And Jenson still hasn't reached out to her, losing himself in alcohol and work and every other excuse he can think of. He's the only one who can fucking fix this.

I've never seen anyone so riddled with guilt but refusing to admit it.

Not that I've spoken to her either, aside from a few brief messages. And I can't fucking call her. Although she's not taking River's calls either.

She's hurt. I don't fucking blame her.

I can't fix that.

Can't fix Jenson.

I can't fucking fix *anything*.

But this, I can do.

My distraction costs me. A fist slams into my face, the hit more direct than I'd like. The crowd boos as I spin, nearly going down before I catch myself and spit blood from the inside of my cheek out onto the floor. But the heavy fucker catches me again, and this time I hit the ground, tasting iron on my tongue and trying to shake off the rattle inside my head.

Shit. I don't dare catch Jenson's eye as I drag myself upright. I flick a quick glance in his direction.

And I pause.

He's pale, and he's on his feet. He bellows something – and that's *terror* on his face, as he points.

Whirling, I brace for the inevitable impact. But nothing comes.

Instead, a small, dark-haired figure darts in front of me. Getting in between me and the beefy, hazy-eyed fucker charging my way, her hands up to stop the fight.

But this isn't a normal fight.

My soul just about leaves my damn body.

He's not going to stop.

He's too fucked up to care that he's about to hit—

No.

I fling myself forward, physically shoving Briar out of the way and taking the full punch across my cheek. Pain explodes across my cheekbone as I spin, my body smashing into the thick, unforgiving ropes.

Shit, that fucking hurt.

But *Briar*. I almost launched her across the ring. I'm on my feet before the thought clears, searching.

What the hell are you doing?

Jenson is there – *fuck*. She's fine. Unhurt. My fingers shake as I turn to face the man who would have fucking killed her if he'd hit her with that much force. Something in his tiny, beady eyes seems to get through that he's in a world of shit, and he takes a step back.

I'm on him before he can do much more than blink, my shoulder pulling painfully as I slam my fist forward. His nose crunches. Again, blood flowing freely as I annihilate him.

His face is almost unrecognisable when I rise to my feet. I still feel unsteady.

But they drink it up, like they always do.

Enough. Tearing off my bloodied wraps, I toss them on top of his limp body and twist.

I storm up to where she's squaring up to an absolutely livid Jenson. She doesn't back away, barely an inch from him. And she's yelling.

Dressed in a shimmering green jumpsuit and heels, she's clearly here for the club. Or... my heart thumps. Maybe not.

The buzzing in my head clears, letting me hear exactly what they're shouting.

Briar jabs a finger in my direction. "Why would you let him fight like that? Four times?"

Jenson is just as furious. "You've been here that fucking *long? By yourself?*"

"Dove invited me. That's not the point – he's killing himself up there, and you're letting him!"

I stop. She's fighting with him... over *me*.

I touch her arm to get her attention. She slams one finger up in front of a wide-eyed Jenson before she turns to me.

This is what I do. I try to reassure her. *It's fine.*

What I've always done, since I was old enough to climb inside a ring and realize I could earn good fucking money doing it.

This is *all* I can do.

Briar glares at me. *Why?*

Jenson's voice is icy. "Because Kai is an *adult*. He enjoys it, and he decides what he does with his time—,"

"But he *doesn't* enjoy it." She whirls to me. "You don't. I've been watching you. It's just – it's a job to you. Like you're going through the motions because you feel you have to."

Her brow crumples as she stares at my face. "And it's *dangerous*, Kai."

I know what I'm doing. You could have been hurt. Worse.

"Is that true?" Jenson's voice cuts through the panic clouding my mind. And then ramps it up. He searches my face. "Fucking hell, Kai. She's right. Isn't she? You don't even enjoy it. Why the fuck are you doing it, then?"

Because—

I stop, turning to Briar. *How did you even know?*

I've been fighting in that ring for years. And nobody has ever asked if I enjoyed it. Even Jenson and River assumed I did, when I kept going back for more.

But Briar watched me for one evening out of thousands, and she saw it.

She sees me.

Her eyes flicker to Jenson, who's watching her too, before returning to me.

She gets it. And she doesn't want to say.

"Kai." Jenson lifts his hands. *Truth. Please.*

Fucking hell.

My movements are slow. *Because we needed the money.*

My fights bring in the majority of the income for the Diamonds, most of it under the table in cash betting. And that money funds the jobs for the men we do have. It helps to fund the work Jenson is nearly killing himself trying to do, to get our part of the city up to scratch even after a decade.

This is something I could do, I say finally. *To give back.*

To him. To lighten the load on his shoulders.

We're not there anymore. Jenson is pale. *We got out of it. And I never expected that of you.*

I know. I wanted to help.

I glance between him and Briar. She's intentionally not watching us, trying to give us privacy. *Are you going to talk to her?*

She nearly hurt herself. His eyes blaze. *We're not done talking about this.*

Tomorrow. I indicate. *Fix this. Please.*

And he nods.

BRIAR

When I turn back, Kai is gone. Jenson lifts his finger accusingly, his mouth opening before I cut him off.

"Don't you point at me. I'm a customer, just like anyone else here. I don't need a lecture, Jenson."

"You threw yourself into a dangerous fucking situation." Rage simmers in his voice. "You could have gotten yourself seriously hurt, jumping in between them. And if you don't care about yourself, you do understand that distracting him could have gotten *Kai* seriously hurt?"

That stops my self-righteous indignation in its tracks. "I didn't think about that."

"You didn't think at all," he snaps. "Jesus, Briar. Look at me."

My throat feels thick as I stare at the ground and shake my head. He's right. And I didn't stop to think before I was climbing in. I've been here for hours, watching him go through the motions, one person after another hitting the mat.

I hated every second. But I couldn't walk away.

Kai was getting tired. Slower. And I let my own fear take over. Another decision made without thinking through the consequences.

My eyes blur. Water drips down onto my cheek.

"Briar." Jenson's voice softens. I startle as a finger nudges beneath my chin, the faintest, featherlight touch. "Please, look at me."

He touched my face. Barely, but he did.

I peek up at him. His eyes tighten at the corners. "I seem to be good at making you cry."

I swallow around the tightness in my throat. "Only when I deserve it."

I shouldn't have gone into that ring. And I shouldn't have lied to him.

And it's as though he can read my mind. "You shouldn't have lied to me."

Another tear. It looks as though he's fighting with himself when he speaks again. "But I shouldn't have reacted like that."

Jenson doesn't touch my face again. But he reaches out, lifting a dark lock of my hair between his fingers. His steely eyes lift to mine.

"Will you come somewhere with me?"

JENSON

This time, I rest of my hand in the small of Briar's back as I steer her around the edges of the Mystic crowd. Even through the shimmering fabric she wears, I can feel her heat soaking into my palm.

It's surprisingly comforting.

Dove pops up in front of us. Her eyes move between Briar and I. "Boo, Briar. You chose Jenny over me?"

Mentally, I pray for patience. "We're just talking, Dove."

How the hell do they even know each other?

Beside me, Briar smiles. "I'll be back if I can. We'll try the *I don't know* this time."

No, she fucking won't.

Dove beams. "Excellent! I have a new recipe you're gonna love."

And then she turns to me, her smile slowly vanishing as she raises a terrifying finger to point at me. "The eyes are watching you, Jenny Rogers."

She vanishes into the crowd before I can ask who the fuck Jenny Rogers is, and I give Briar an incredulous look. "How do you know Dove?"

We start moving through the crowd again. Her laughter is quiet next to me. "I met her the first time I came. She invited me out with

her. She's – nice. Sad, though."

Dove, sad? "You have a knack for cutting through shields, Briar Rose."

"You make it sound like some sort of superpower."

Me. Kai. River. Now Dove. The way that Briar sees people, understands them, reads them so easily, feels like a gift. She wears her emotions on her sleeve, completely open. Vulnerable.

And I *hurt* her. My lips press together. "Briar—,"

I see the hands first. They reach for me, tipped with long, scarlet talons, aiming directly for my face. I don't have chance to move before they wrap around my neck, sharp edges digging into the skin as my head is yanked down.

Wet lips slam against mine, a tongue shoved into my mouth.

I freeze in place.

I don't do anything. Can't do anything. I can't fucking move. Terror roots my feet to the floor.

There. The voice purrs, high and throat and full of venom. *I know what you need.*

My body breaks into a cold sweat, beginning to tremble.

Hands over my skin. Touching, everywhere.

And then they're gone. The silence bursts into a kaleidoscope of noise that returns in a rush as I stagger back, frantically wiping at my face. My neck. My mouth.

But it doesn't stop the memories. The voice.

Look at you. Your body doesn't lie, Jenson.

A horrific, high-pitched sound comes from my throat as I shake my head in desperation.

She's dead. Gone. Under the fucking ground. In hell, where she belongs.

My breathing locks up inside my chest as I focus. Mallory is screaming, her face contorted as Briar pulls her away from me. By her *hair*. Briar has her small hands wrapped around Mal's blond hair with surprising strength as she rips her away before she pushes her back and gets in between us, her back to me.

Protecting me.

And Mallory is screaming, clutching her scalp. "Who the fuck are you? Fucking psychopath – you ripped out my hair!"

Breathe. Fucking breathe.

It feels like I'm underwater. Everything has slowed down.

Briar shakes off her hand, pale strands falling to the floor. It's not a small amount. "You assaulted him—,"

"I *kissed* him!" Mal cranes her neck, staring at me. "Tell this bitch, Jenson. We have a relationship!"

Briar stiffens. "He didn't ask for it. Didn't want it. That's assault."

Mal scrambles to her feet, raising her hand. It jerks me out of my panic, my head clearing as she pulls it back to deliver a slap. "Don't think you're any better than I am. You fucking sl—,"

The hand that wraps around her wrist isn't gentle, and she cries out. "I strongly suggest you don't finish that sentence, Mallory. We just seem to keep having the same conversation, don't we?"

River's eyes are nearly black as he looks down at her, and then to Briar. His face gentles. "You okay, warrior? Heard you're fighting all the battles tonight."

"She—,"

"I know." His eyes glance to me, assessing before he turns back. "Mallory was warned before about what would happen if she tried this again. Weren't you, Mal?"

Mal stares at me with disbelief. "I thought if – if I just did it, if you at least *tried*—,"

If she just dragged up the worst memories of my life and forced herself on me, that I would want her. That it would be fine. That I'd just *get over it*.

My voice sounds raw, almost ragged. "*No.*"

I don't have the capacity for anything else. Briar takes a step back, until she's almost against my chest, the way she was at Ravenhall. She's careful to keep her hands out in front of her. And she turns her head, her voice quiet enough that only I can hear it. "She's not going to touch you again."

Her words ease the tightness behind my ribs, and I shift forward. She leans back against me as if she's fitted there all our lives, a perfectly matching puzzle piece.

Mal's eyes widen. "So you *can* touch. You lied to me."

"I don't owe you anything." The words feel like razor blades. "I gave you an honest explanation years ago, and I am tired of telling you no, Mal. It ends now."

River's mouth tightens. "You're finished here. Out. Now. You won't be coming back."

A permanent ban. She spends every night here, looking for something she never seems to find. Pity tightens my chest at the panic that crosses her face. "Wait. You can't ban me."

But I'm done. River keeps hold of her wrist as he pulls her away. "You good? Both of you?"

I nod. Briar does the same. "We'll be upstairs."

Understanding dawns on his face. "I'll handle things here."

He always does. Even when I'm not sure I deserve it. "Thanks, River."

JENSON

Briar pauses in the middle of the room, looking around her with cautious curiosity.

I push the door closed at the top of the stairs, sealing us off from the noise of the club beneath our feet. It squeals, the old brass hinges rusty from lack of use. Only a faint line on the floor is evidence that it's used at all, a few of the men using it occasionally when they can't find a private spot. Normally at Mallory's insistence.

I grimace. I can't remember the last time I voluntarily came up here. My eyes linger on a door in the corner, darting away.

Following Briar's gaze, I try to see the place through her eyes and not my own fractured history. The room stretches out, a few battered-looking doors leading to other, smaller rooms leading off it.

It's empty. A faint, charred smell still seems to linger even after we cleaned it out, tossing out the blackened furniture and scrubbing every inch. A long, scarred wooden bar sits against the back wall. The shelves behind it are empty and coated with dust, the huge mirror cracked and blackened around the edges.

A few of the walls still show streaked black marks.

You'd never know from downstairs. But here, there's no hiding.

"What happened here? It feels... off. Wrong." Briar wraps her arms around herself as she turns to face me.

She doesn't belong here. She never did. She's too... clean. Sweet. Too fucking pure to be tarnished by this darkness.

I don't even have a chair up here for her to sit on. My eyes catch on the bar, and I slip past her, settling down on the dusty floor and wiping it off as best I can.

Her green eyes are steady as I hold up my hand and pat my chest. "Sit with me? Like you did before."

I act as her chair as she carefully kneels between my legs and shifts, shuffling until she's back against me, her warm weight a balm to my senses. Her legs slide out to fit between mine, her hands on her lap.

I can breathe easier when I have her close. The realization soaks in as she sighs. "There's a lot of pain here, Jenson."

I run my fingers carefully over her hair. "Yes."

She sits quietly. Endlessly patient, as I sort through the muddled thoughts in my head before I clear my throat. "How much do you know about the Suits?"

"The gangs? Not much. Only what I overheard my father talking about. There are four, right?"

"Three, now. It used to be the four of us. Clubs. Hearts. Spades." The thump of my heart sounds loud. "And Diamonds. But the Spades were dissolved a while back. The three Suits that are left each manage a territory in the city. A third, or close to it."

Her voice is quiet. "And which one do you belong to?"

I tease a dark curl with my fingers, watching her instead of this room I fucking despise. "I'm the leader of the Diamonds, Briar. River is my second."

"And Kai? Is he your... third?"

"We've never defined it. But yes, he would be. He doesn't answer to anyone."

Not even me, really. Even River and I don't have that relationship.

I can almost see her thoughts racing. "So this is your... your headquarters? Up here?"

I make a noise of confirmation, sensing her confusion as she tries to put the pieces together with only one part.

I don't blame her. I'm the leader of a club filled with nothing but ghosts. "It's a long story."

She shifts against me. "We have time."

I keep touching her. "My father was the leader of the Diamonds when I was born. I grew up here. River's dad was his second-in-command."

"I bet the two of you were nothing but trouble."

She doesn't ask, but I give her the answer anyway. "My mom left, not long after I was born. She couldn't deal with the club. The demands on his time. She left me behind."

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "No parent should abandon a child."

"It was a long time ago." I never missed what I never had. "I loved this place. Never felt like I was missing anything. There was always something happening, always someone watching out for me. For both of us, really."

I wish I'd brought up a drink. "I think I was around sixteen when my dad met someone else. Her name was Katherine."

I don't say anything for a while. Briar twists her head to look up at me. "We can stop, Jenson. It's okay."

Carefully, I slide my arms up and around her waist. "I want you to know. But it's not... it's not a great story."

"I'm tougher than I look." She doesn't look away. "I can take it."

Her quiet conviction bolsters my own. "Katherine was... pretty. Beautiful, really. And she knew it. She wound my father around her little finger, until he was obsessed with her. He became blind to everything else. Nothing else mattered to him but her. Making her happy. The rest of it was just an inconvenience to him."

His club. His business. His son.

"There was something *off* about her," I murmur. "I didn't like her. She needed to be adored. It was like an addiction. I didn't, and she hated it. And my father, he just got worse. Fighting in the club, with his friends, people he'd known all his life. Members started to leave in their droves rather than stay and risk him focusing on them. Accusing them of wanting her, of being horrible to her, of being too nice. His obsession became paranoia, Katherine dripping poison in his ear at every turn. River's parents left to go traveling rather than

stay and watch, but he wouldn't leave. He knew something was happening."

"He's loyal." A single, careful tap of her finger against my arm wrapped around her stomach. "Fiercely so."

"Not that I ever deserved it." I stare out into the clubhouse.

Her response is gentle. "Maybe he saw something different in you than you see in yourself. What happened to your father?"

I suck in a breath. "He was out one night. *Finally* doing something, after I spent weeks trying to tell him how bad things had gotten while he was wrapped up in Katherine. The Diamonds were falling apart. The prez of the Spades was trying to push in, and we had no men. So he went for a meeting to try and smooth things over."

I drop my head, breathing in the scent of raspberries. "I was sitting here. At this spot. Nobody else was here. Hell, nobody was left, and not anyone that wanted to be in the clubhouse. River was out, trying to stem some of the gaps even though we weren't even old enough to act as full members. Katherine came out. She asked if we could start over. She said she was worried about my father. About his behavior. And she poured me a drink. I was seventeen. Never had vodka before."

Swallowing, I close my eyes. "I started to feel sick. Dizzy. And she – she took me into the bedroom. That one, in the corner."

Hands. And lips. And that fucking voice in my ear.

Briar turns to stone in my arms. "No."

I run my hand over her hair again. For my sake, as much as hers. "I told you it wasn't a good story."

"She...", her breathing turns harsh. "She *raped* you."

It takes me a minute. "Yeah. She did. That was my first time."

"Jenson." She starts to shake, then. "I'm so sorry... and I lied to you. I put you in that position."

"You didn't know. But... it gets worse, Briar."

"Tell me." Her voice trembles. "What... what happened?"

"I woke up." My throat feels almost as dry as that day. "And Kai was there."

"He was part of the club?"

"I'd never even seen him before. This skinny, underfed kid, shaking me. He wouldn't speak. But he kept pointing to the door. There was shouting. My father came home, and he found me. He thought – thought I *wanted* it. That I'd set him up to leave, so I could be with Katherine. I was *seventeen*."

Bile rises in my throat. "She'd been keeping Kai there without any of us knowing. And he must have known. In the fucking closet, living like some kind of animal. Eating scraps at night with my father turning a blind eye. And she'd hurt him, Briar. Not like... not like me. Physically. He was so small. But he wouldn't stop shaking me. And he wouldn't leave me there."

My eyes feel wet. And Briar is crying. "God, Jenson."

"My father had set it all on fire," I say numbly. "The clubhouse. Everything was on fire. She was there, somewhere. He knew I was in the bedroom; he knew *Kai* was there. But he poured gasoline all over this place and threw the match down anyway, with all of us inside."

Briar turns in my arms, kneeling to face me. Her hands shake as she lifts them, drops them again. "I want – I don't know what to say. *Do*."

"Stay with me." I don't need anything else but her. "Don't leave."

"I'm not going anywhere."

She watches my face as I speak, the words coming faster now like a damn unleashed. "I pushed myself up, and I was so dizzy. I grabbed Kai. Wrapped a blanket over him, and we just ran. I knew the way, and he wouldn't have made it otherwise."

I still remember how weightless he felt. Eleven years old, and I could feel every rib under my fingers. Even in my panic, it stood out to me.

Smoke. so much smoke. Burning my lungs, my throat. My eyes streaming. "Someone saw the smoke, and they'd evacuated downstairs. Kai had been trying to wake me for a while when we got out. We were just in time. And River, he was on the other side of the barriers. It took three officers to pin him down so he couldn't come in after us, and he was still fighting." I half-smile. "Like you said. Loyal."

She doesn't smile back. "Your father died? And that – Katherine?"
I nod.

"And Kai?"

"He wouldn't leave me." I can't smile at that memory. Not when he was so – *broken*. "He attached himself to me like glue. It took River weeks to coax him away so I could even use the toilet without an audience."

"The three of you." Her eyes are still wet. "You stayed together."

I nod. "My father had decimated the accounts. But he'd hidden the spiral well. Nobody really knew how bad it was. The other Suits – they would have taken over, if they'd known. Gryphon, the Spades prez, would have made sure we ended up in an alleyway somewhere. So I kept it going. At least on the outside. We were still the Diamonds. Still solid."

And on the inside, we crumbled like soil.

"I held it," I say numbly. "I didn't stop. River helped. And Kai – he stayed with us. We didn't even know what to do with him. How to help him. We tried, but I've never heard him speak. I think he can. He just... she *made* him silent."

"I'm glad she's dead." The low words draw my eyes up. Briar shakes her head. "She deserved what happened to her. And your father."

"I visit his grave sometimes. I had them buried together. In case – in case Kai ever wanted to see her. Not so much now, but... he wasn't always a bad father. There was something inside him, must have been, but I never saw it. Never saw that... that *obsession* that he had for her. It drove him out of his mind."

"You're not the same as him." Her words are quiet. "You're not him."

"But I could be, Briar. How would I even know? It was better to—,"

To be cold. Not to care. Never to get too close to a woman, not that I wanted to after Katherine. But I never wanted to risk turning into *him*.

Slowly, I rake my gaze over Briar. She meets my eyes. "That's why you wanted the arrangement."

My nod is slow. "It wasn't my idea. Kai and River cooked it up between them one night. But... It appealed to me. I wouldn't have to worry about them touching me or kissing me. I wouldn't even get to know them. And when it was done, I would say goodbye."

My heart hurts as a small furrow appears between her eyes. She shifts, her eyes dropping to the floor. "And... you still want that?"

She's so careful not to touch me, even now. Her hands are clenched in her lap. "When I saw you, I thought that you could ruin me, Briar Rose. That I could become obsessed with you."

I was right.

"I wouldn't let that happen." Her jaw tightens. "And neither would River or Kai."

Maybe she's right.

"No," I say finally. "I don't want temporary. But... be patient with me?"

Her green eyes are bright, hope and pain and grief swimming in them. For me. "I'll be careful with you. If you will, with me. You have to want it."

Hope. In the middle of the filthy, soot-stained room where I lost mine, it feels like I'm finding it again. My smile is small, but it's genuine.

"I want it. Where should we start?"

I want *her*.

A small, mischievous smile tugs at her lips. "We have two nights left of our agreement. Maybe we could start there?"

"You still want to?" It's a reminder that I took her virginity. While she was *sleeping*. And then I fucking yelled at her afterward.

I can't even hold her properly to apologize.

"Stop putting up barriers in your own mind." Briar half-smiles. "I enjoyed it, Jenson. Watching it back was... I liked it. A lot. Unless you've decided it's not for you—"

I nearly give myself whiplash. "No. You were perfect."

Dangerously so. But I have to trust her. And River, and Kai.

They won't let me fall.

BRIAR

Standing in front of my bedroom mirror, I look again. My hand lifts up to press against the glass.

The woman staring back at me feels like another Briar. Another *life*.

A lie.

The knock on my open door has me turning. "Papa."

Even my father looks nothing like the man I remember from my childhood. Older. More stooped. And there's an uncomfortable distance between us now that has never existed before.

Even when I was alone, I always had him.

But I don't feel so alone anymore.

I don't feel any warmth from him. It feels like an assessment as he glances at my outfit. "You look lovely, sweetheart."

"Thank you." As if we're both playing a role neither of us has interest in any longer. "Is there any news on the company?"

"You don't need to worry about that."

He's always dismissed my questions. I see it now, so clearly that I wonder how I ever missed it. Maybe I thought it was protectiveness. A consequence of my childhood. I was a weak child. I had no energy, no vibrancy. And I sense that my father still sees that child when he looks at me.

I am not as weak as he thinks I am.

And my patience is running thin. I slip a bracelet over my wrist and settle on the bed to slip my shoes on.

"Philip is waiting downstairs." My father glances around. "You remember your role?"

As if I would forget. Useless. Stupid. Empty-headed. "Yes. But I won't lie."

His hand waves irritably. "Just behave. It's one evening."

It's my entire life. But I say nothing as I follow him downstairs to where Philip stands in the hallway. He smiles, bland and polite. "Briar. You're a vision."

All of the same words. The same steps. Day after day.

I don't fit here anymore. If I ever did.

Philip is silent on the way over. He taps on his phone, apologizing as we pull up outside the museum. "Work, I'm afraid. Very boring."

My smile doesn't reach my eyes. We follow others inside, my hand curled around his arm. My smile turns genuine as I take in the artwork around me. "I've never been here before. I always wanted to go."

"You like art?" There's something almost amused in his voice as he deftly sweeps two glasses of champagne from a tray, handing me the smaller. "Here you go."

"I do." Studying him, I take a sip of my drink. "Anything creative appeals to me in some way. It's why I do what I do."

"Of course." His eyes aren't on me. They're scanning the room around us, searching for something. Networking opportunities, probably. "Your little store."

Frowning, I take another sip, catching his eyes glance down at my glass. He's not wrong, and that annoys me. It could be so much better. I've been holding myself back for too long, trying to balance bending myself into a shape that pleases my father while doing enough to make myself happy.

And as a result, neither of us are truly happy. "I think I'll get another glass of champagne."

I wander away before he can stop me, weaving through the crowd and pausing to take in some of the art on display. One of them has

my head tilting in confusion. A small guffaw next to me has me turning. The woman beside me snorts. "They shove anything on a canvas and call it art now."

I mean, I don't disagree with her. Grinning, I turn back to the plain white canvas. The piece of orange peel looks like it's on the verge of crumbling into dust. "It gets people talking, though."

"True," the woman muses. She looks to be in her forties, her chin-length bob cut as sharp as the tone of her voice. "That's a beautiful dress, by the way."

"Oh! Thank you. I actually made this one. I'm a designer."

"Really?" She turns to me, casting a critical look over my silver dress. The beading on the side swirls across my waist and down, creating the illusion of waves. "Do you have a card?"

"No," I say weakly. She's already digging around in her bag, and she hands over a small piece of card.

"Lauren Abrahams. I'd like to see what else you have. Send them to me here, and we'll talk."

I stare down at the card, wide-eyed. A *lead*.

"Yes." I snap myself upright, grinning. "I will. Thank you."

"Darling." Philip sounds cold as he appears next to me. "It's time for dinner."

Lauren glances between her, her eyebrows raising as if in surprise. "I'll look forward to hearing from you."

"Sorry." I pull my manners together as he escorts me. "It was a work thing."

He ignores my words completely. As we sit at a table with several other couples, he turns to the man beside him, drawing him into conversation.

He also ignores me through the starter. And the main course.

When dessert is served, he sits back, sliding his arm around my chair. "I have something for you."

"Oh?" I'm watching the plates being carried out by the smartly dressed waiting staff. The dessert looks incredible.

A hand squeezes my knee, and I tug it away as I turn to him. Philip looks annoyed. "Pay attention."

My eyes slip down to the table, and my body goes cold at the small, red velvet box set against the crisp white tablecloth. "Philip."

He waves his hand. "I know. Too much. But we've danced around this for long enough, Briar. Neither of us are getting any younger."

I have no feelings for this man. But if I did, his words would have doused them completely. Numb, I watch as he pulls the box toward him and tugs out the ring. Seizing my hand, he slides it onto my finger. "There. Perfect fit."

The stone is heavy. Obscenely so, the diamond bigger than my nail. It's not a ring I would ever have chosen for myself. The exuberant woman opposite me gasps, drawing our attention. "An engagement? Congratulations!"

Words ring out from around us, some people clapping as Philip grins and holds up his hand in acknowledgement. His smirk tightens as he glances at me. "Smile, Briar."

I will not lie.

But the words catch in my throat. Carefully, I slide the ring free. The applause continues as Philip's smile fades completely. "Put it on. Now."

"It's lovely," I force out. "But a little loose. I'm just going to visit the bathroom. I don't want to lose it."

Shoving the ring into the box, I stand abruptly, not looking around as I grab my bag and shift out of my seat. Behind me, Philip murmurs something that has the silent, watching table laughing as I push through the doors to the hall, my heart thumping.

The sign for the bathroom points to my right.

The exit to my left.

This life is not mine.

It's as if I've been asleep for years, and I'm just waking up. Taking off, I make for the exit, shoving past a surprised-looking security guard before the cold air hits me.

Looking around, I start walking. Then moving faster, until I'm almost running. I wouldn't put it past Philip to come after me.

I wince, imagining his reaction when I don't return to the table. I'm sure he'll smooth my absence over. A sudden illness, perhaps, or a family emergency.

Anything but the *truth*.

BRIAR

A few streets away, it starts to sink in how cold I am. And how lost I am.

Damn it. I walk for a while before I admit defeat, digging around in my bag.

"Hey, warrior." River picks up on the first ring, his voice teasing. "You okay?"

I bite down on my lip. "Um. Yes."

I almost feel his attention sharpen. River is lazy humour and smouldering eyes, until something is wrong. "Tell me what's wrong."

"I'm lost." I cringe as I admit it. "I was at the museum, and I started walking. And now I'm not sure how to get back."

"Left or right from the museum?" There's a metallic jangle. "Briar?"

"Right from inside. But I took a few turns."

"Okay. Don't panic. I want you to walk to the corner of the street you're on and look at the name for me. What is it?"

"Lefferts Street?"

His stern demeanor doesn't change. "I know where you are. Stand somewhere with good lighting. I'll be there in twenty minutes. Stay on the phone."

He sounds so... stern. I bite down on my lip. "Sorry."

"No apology needed. I'm coming to get you. What were you doing at the museum?"

My lips part, but nothing comes out for a moment. "I was at an event."

I leave Philip out. In part because it sounds pathetic to admit that my father is trying to set me up in an arranged marriage at the age of twenty-six. But mainly because I don't want *that* Briar's life to bleed into this. Whatever it is that we have.

He whistles. "Sounds fancy. Does this mean I get to see you all dressed up?"

My smile grows. "Maybe. Did I interrupt you?"

"No. I've been working out, but I'd just finished."

Oh. "Does that mean I get to see you without a shirt on?"

"Not in this weather." There's laughter in his voice. "I'm wearing twelve layers."

There's something so easy about talking to him. "I wouldn't mind some of those layers."

"Do you have a coat?" River groans at my silence. "*Briar*. You're going to keep us busy, I can feel it."

It was a stupid thing to do. Another one. The list is getting longer.

Maybe my father was right. About that much, at least.

Footsteps up ahead draw my eye before they slow, and I suddenly realise exactly how stupid I am.

Feigning ease, I press the phone against my ear, leaning to look both ways before darting across the road. I wait for a few seconds, before the bottom drops out of my stomach. "River?"

He senses my change in tone immediately. "I'm here."

"There's a man," I whisper. "He's watching me. I just crossed the road."

The silhouette lingers up ahead, not moving closer. But not moving away, either. Just... watching me.

"Did he cross too?"

"Yeah." My whisper is shaky. "He's just standing there."

He sucks in a breath. "I'm less than five minutes away. I'm breaking every speed limit in the city to get to you. Okay? It's going

to be fine, baby. Take a breath. Get ready to run if you need to. Is there anyone else around?"

"No." My voice cracks.

"I want you to walk slowly away. Try not to show that you're on to them. I know it's hard. I'm coming. Are there any houses close by with lights on?"

I raise my eyes to stare down the street. "I think these are offices. I'll keep looking."

"Good girl. Nearly there."

Unable to resist, I glance over my shoulder. The figure is moving too. "He's moving, River."

"Thirty seconds." His voice raises. "Just thirty more seconds, okay?"

There's a screech of brakes on the other line as I walk past a small space full of large trash containers, and my heart almost stops. "River!"

"I'm fine. Where is he now?"

I turn to look—

The phone smashes out of my hand as hands cover my mouth. The scent of cigarettes and unwashed skin fills my nose, my mouth. My scream sounds muted, and I claw at the hand holding me as it yanks me back, toward the darkness next to me.

I lose a shoe. He lifts me by the waist, dragging me as I kick desperately, trying to hit him with my other heel before I lose that one too. The man doesn't say anything, his breathing heavy in my ear, and somehow it's more terrifying. I throw an elbow back into his chest, but it doesn't stop him moving.

He's going to pull me out of sight. River won't see me.

Stay calm. Think—

Leaning forward over the arms banded around me, I strain, hoping to pull him off balance before I throw myself back as hard as I can.

My head smashes into his with an audible crack.

And his arms loosen.

It's all I need. I take off, running toward the sound of a car engine, my breathing a choked, begging noise in my throat as I race

directly into the road and throw my hands up at the blinding lights.
“Help me!”

Please. My sobs are louder now, adrenaline giving way to fear, and the slamming of a car door has me suddenly backing up—

“Briar!” River’s hands are on my face, my arms, and I throw myself into him as my sobs get louder. “Jesus, baby, where is he?”

My hand shakes as I point to the dark space.

River glances between me and the darkness, his brow creasing as he studies me. I suck in a shuddering breath as he lifts me, carrying me over to the car and placing me down into the warm seat. He shrugs his coat off, wrapping it around my shaking limbs as I fight to catch my breath. River drops down to crouch beside me, his hands stroking my hair back. “Are you hurt? I don’t want to leave you, so I need to make a call if we’re going to catch him. And the rules are a little different here, since it’s not our area.”

Before he does it to anyone else. “I’m not hurt.”

River’s already dialling, his hand still stroking my cheek and his eyes not leaving mine. “Aiden. You have an attacker around Lefferts Street. Tried to drag my girl into the trash area halfway down. Two minutes ago.”

He listens, and I catch his attention, my breathing settling. “Brown beanie hat. Fifties. White. Grey fingerless gloves and a puffer jacket with a patch on the right side.”

River’s eyebrows fly up. “You get that? Yeah. Right side.”

“And a possible broken nose. I hit him pretty hard.”

A small, proud smile tips up the side of River’s mouth that makes me smile back, even though I’m still shaking. “That’s right. My girl is a bigger badass than yours, asshole. Tell your scary twin not to kill me for saying it. Or Alyss, for that matter.”

He hangs up without another word, still touching me. I need the reassurance as much as he does.

“Who was that?”

“Aiden is part of the Hearts. He deals with things like this. His guys will get here much quicker, since it’s their territory. The Hearts will get him, Briar. They have no appetite to leave men like that on the streets.”

Good. I pull River's coat up. "Thank you for coming."

If he hadn't—

I see the same awareness on his face. "Always call me. I don't care if you think I'm busy. I don't care if we've argued, or if Jenson's being a dick. I don't give a fuck what the circumstances are, Briar. Promise me that you'll call any of us if you're ever in trouble, baby."

When I nod, he loosens a breath. "Okay. I want you away from here."

He closes my door, and I shrink beneath his coat, shamelessly soaking in the warmth as he slides into the driver's seat less than a minute later. He hands me my phone, tossing my heels into his backseat. "They were on the ground."

His voice is dark, and I search for something to distract him. "What happened to your other ten layers?"

River's lips tip up, but he still looks strained. I curl up in the seat, watching as he pulls out.

When my body starts to shake again, I huddle under the coat.

I'm fine. I got away. "Where are we going?"

"Ravenhall. Unless you want to go home?"

"Ravenhall is good." His knuckles are white on the wheel. "I'm okay, River."

Cautiously, I slide my hand out, placing it on his thigh. He lets out a shuddering breath. "I thought I was going to be too late. God, I nearly was."

One hand covers mine, the other on the wheel. "I haven't felt so scared for a long time."

I grip his fingers. "I'm sorry—,"

"Briar," he says heavily. "Don't apologize. Not for assholes like that."

He lifts my hand, pressing his lips to the pulse in my wrist. "Let's get you back."

Cautiously, I consider what might be waiting at Ravenhall. "Could we... *not* tell Jenson about this?"

He slides me an incredulous look. "You don't think he already knows? I messaged him and Kai as I was leaving. They're on their way back."

At my crestfallen look, he finally looks amused. "You signed on for all three of us, baby. You're getting all three."
Wonderful.

Kai

“Where is she?”

I’m right behind Jenson as he explodes through the door of Ravenhall, the car doors left open behind us in our haste. River shoots up from where he’s sitting on the stairs, dragging his hand across his neck repeatedly.

Shut up. She fell asleep in the car. I put her in her room.

Shoving past Jenson, I frown. *Is she okay?*

“I think so.” He whispers it, but his face still shows the strain. “Aiden messaged. They got him.”

My tense muscles relax at that. Fucker won’t be approaching any more women in the dark.

“I’m going up there.”

I put my hand on Jenson’s arm when he tries to stalk past me. *Let me.*

His emotions are leaking out of him. Fear, and anger, and everything I’m feeling, but in such a way that he’s almost bleeding with his panic. *Please.*

At his nod, I’m already moving, passing River and leaving them talking in low tones as I jump up the stairs. Briar is out, River’s coat pulled over her where she sleeps on top of the sheets.

My eyes sweep over her, looking for injuries before I ease onto the bed beside her and tug her into my arms. Her sleepy murmur has the tension leaking from my body. "Kai?"

I can't sign, not when I'm holding her. And I can't let go of her, not yet. Briar turns, shuffling closer until her cheek is pressed against my pounding heart, her leg sliding between mine.

She sighs as if it's exactly what she needed.

I don't move until her breathing changes. A sleepy murmur as her eyes flutter open. "Hi."

I press my lips to her forehead before pulling back, my eyebrows drawing down in a clear question.

"I'm okay," she whispers. "Really. It just – it scared me. If River hadn't come when he did..."

She trails off, leaving the words unspoken. She doesn't need to say it.

My heart beats faster at that. I sign with one arm, keeping the other wrapped around her.

We would find you. Always. I promise.

She smiles, but there's something sad in it. I study her for clues before my chest tightens. *He told you what happened?*

It's clear from the look in her eyes. She's looking at me - not differently. But *deeper*. As if she sees a small, scared child instead of the man I am now. I still.

Briar's nod is slow. "Not everything. But basics. You saved his life."

I roll my eyes. *That's up for debate.*

He was the one who carried me out of that building. Who *stayed* with me. A seventeen-year-old boy became a man overnight, with a broken kingdom and a traumatized child attached to him as a bonus.

Jenson never made me feel like a burden.

As far as I'm concerned, it's not up for debate at all.

He saved me. My mother was not a good person.

I settle back. *She was sick. In the head.*

I never found out what exactly it was. But she never should have had a child.

I don't remember a lot of my childhood. J and R found Emily after the fire to help me. There was no record of me anywhere.

Nobody ever knew I existed. Even my birthday is a random date, plucked from the air. A panicked response from River and Jenson when they realized it had been over a year since I'd been with them.

I didn't even know what a birthday was when they explained it to me.

Briar's eyes are wet. *You don't need to tell me.*

But my hands keep moving.

It was always dark. She'd let me out at night to use the bathroom and eat, but she didn't like me speaking.

My fingers skate over my skin. *I learned to stay silent. And I never came out. Sometimes the space changed if we moved. She'd leave me until nobody was there.*

I feel her hand slide under my shirt. She moves it up slowly, until her finger brushes the scars that cover my chest. "What made you come out that night?"

I hate thinking about that night. *I didn't know what I could hear. J... he wanted her to stop. And then there was a lot of shouting. The smell. It didn't feel right. I opened the bedroom door and I couldn't see anything. I woke up, and he carried me out.*

"And you stayed," she whispers, searching my face. "With him."

I nod. *It was the first time I felt safe.*

I cup her face in mine, running my thumb over her cheek.

There is a lot of good out there too. I am not broken. Still here.

I am more than my beginnings. Jenson and River taught me that. But I've never truly felt it until now.

Because Briar doesn't look at me as if I'm broken.

She pushes herself up until her lips meet mine. Soft, so fucking soft, just like they were in the car.

I'm more prepared this time. I capture her chin with my hand, tilting it until I can trace her lips with my tongue, taste *her*.

Briar makes a needy noise in her throat, pressing into me, and I push my arm beneath her until I can spread my hand over her back, needing her impossibly closer as our kiss deepens, our breathing unsteady.

I don't push for anything else, and neither does she. This isn't about sex. It's something more.

She's still here. So am I.

That's all that matters.

When the door opens, Jenson enters silently, his eyes moving to her. Briar moves to sit up, but he shakes his head. "Stay where you are."

She settles back into me as he kicks off his shoes. Jenson crawls onto the bed, lining himself against her back with Briar still facing me.

He kisses her shoulder, pressing his lips to her skin. His eyes close. "You're alright."

Not a question. As if any other answer is unacceptable.

She lets out a deep breath, pressed between the two of us. "I am now."

BRIAR

I'm too lost in my own thoughts to register the bell tinkling over the door.

Thoughts of Kai. Of Jenson. River, driving me home last night with my hand wrapped in his, balanced on his thigh.

The argument I had with my father when I walked through the door, my dress wrinkled and dirty and my hair undone, my heels in my hand.

Things between us are more strained than they've ever been, and I'm... done.

Blinking, the page of calculations in front of me comes into focus. I should have enough for a small apartment, at least for the first few months.

My mind slips to Ravenhall, but I push it away.

We barely know each other. Even if my feelings are starting to become deeper. *More*. With every passing day, every time I speak to them, every time they do something to make me fall a little more in

—

You don't even know what love is, Briar.

But it's starting to feel like maybe I do. And maybe it looks like three men, who walked into my life at a time when I didn't even know how much I needed them.

It frightens me, how much I need them. They've made me no promises. Jenson said he wanted to try, but he hasn't mentioned it since.

And our second night is tonight. My body tingles at the thought.

Heavy footsteps yank me out of my reverie, my body jolting as I almost launch myself off the table. "Hello—,"

My words cut off. Blinking, I stare at the blond visitor. "Philip?"

He looks out of place here, even as he glances around while straightening his camel-coloured coat. "Briar."

"What are you... why are you here?" Flummoxed, I straighten as he takes in the mannequins, the dresses draped over them. The empty space. His lips twist in silent judgment.

"I wanted to speak with you after last night. And I realized I'd never seen where you... work." The small pause, the slight tilt of his lips is all I need to know he's assessing and finding my studio wanting.

My hackles rise as I glance to the closed door. "What did you want to speak about?"

At my sharp words, he turns to look at me. His pale brown eyes sweep my face, tightening at the corners. "You don't seem like yourself at the moment. Not last night. Not at the dinner with my mother. I wanted to check on you. You left the gala very abruptly."

I wait for him to mention the engagement, but he doesn't. "You could have at least let me know you got home safely."

I deflate just a little. "You're right. I'm sorry for leaving like that. I felt a little sick, but I'm fine now."

Philip examines me as if I'm lying. "My mother was not impressed with your behavior when you met, you know. You'll need to work harder next time you see her. You don't get a second chance at a first impression."

His pointed, precise words tell me exactly why he's here. "You weren't concerned about me, were you? You're here to lecture me. About leaving last night, about the dinner with your mother. About all of it."

My words spill out in the space between us. "You don't even *know* me, Philip. Not really. And what you do know, you don't seem to like.

Why do you even want to marry me?"

He tugs at the edge of his sleeve. "It's a good match. I'll be taking over as partner from your father when he retires, merging our firms together. It makes sense."

My brows crease. "That's it? You can have that without needing to marry me. It would be easier on everyone, including my father."

He smiles at me, then. And I realize that I've never seen him look at me like he is now. Like he's really looking, instead of scanning me for flaws. "You're very beautiful."

Something clenches in my stomach, and I take a step back. The edges of my desk press into the backs of my thighs. "And?"

He follows me, stepping closer. "I don't need anything more than that. Your personality is irrelevant. Your behavior is... regretful. But we'll train that out of you sooner or later."

It's not desire that heats my skin as he pushes into my space, my body leaning back over the desk. It's something darker, as I look over his shoulder to the closed door, to the empty space around us. I've never been alone with Philip before, my father always acting as a buffer between us.

Fear.

It floods my body as I strain away from him. "You make me sound like a pet."

Philip lifts some of my hair in his hand, running it through his fingers. The polite, bland mask slips from his expression. "You'll be whatever I tell you to be. Come here, Briar."

I shake my head. "Step back. I'm not comfortable – I want you to leave."

After last night, this is too much. The fear, both new and remembered, threatens to smother me.

Is there nowhere safe?

Philip doesn't move back. He pushes himself closer, into me until I can feel his breath on my cheek as I twist my head. His murmured words have my throat closing in panic as I try to shift from underneath him. "I think we've already established that what you want has no bearing on our arrangement at all."

A noise pulls from my chest as his hand comes up to grip my chin, holding me in place. He doesn't move as my hands lift, trying to push him away.

He's strong. Stronger than I realized, with his bland, dismissive words, and his feigned bowing to my father.

And much more dangerous.

My breathing comes faster now, as we stare at each other. My hands are wrapped around his wrist as I try futilely to push him away, his lower body pinning mine in place.

"I'm going to enjoy breaking you." His lips skate over my cheek. "Have your little tantrums if you like. It won't make a difference. We will be married, and once you're in my bed you'll learn exactly what happens if you don't do as you're told."

"Please," I whisper. My voice shakes as I keep pushing, but he doesn't move. "I want you to leave now."

His grip on my hair is painful, my head yanked back as he slams his mouth down. My legs kick out as he bites down on my lip before pushing his tongue into my mouth, his fingers holding the edges of my mouth so I can't bite down.

He pulls back, his breathing harsh. "I can do whatever I want, Briar. Pull your skirt up, turn you over and fuck you, right here, put you on your fucking knees if I want to. Your father isn't here to stop me. Not that he would, with the amount I'm paying for you."

"I'll tell him." *Rage*. It fills me, red-hot fury battling with the icy fear that still fills me as his head pulls back. My nails dig into Philip's skin, drawing blood, but he doesn't even flinch. "This wedding will not be going ahead."

And he only laughs. "Your father knows exactly who he's handing you over to, Briar Rose. He plays the doting father well, but in the end, the money is the only thing he cares about."

The verbal jab lands directly between my ribs, stealing my breath. "You're lying."

Whatever my father is, he wouldn't push me to marry Philip after this. My lip feels swollen, painful as I run my tongue over it.

He clicks his tongue. "I believe I'll insist that the wedding moves up. One month from now. You're entirely too irresistible."

My head shakes. "You... you're—,"

Philip pulls back suddenly, releasing me. My legs, pinned in midair, collapse to the floor, taking me with them as my spine rakes painfully against the edge of my desk. He ignores me as I crumple onto the floorboards, my breath rasping as I scramble to get to my feet.

Blindly, I reach behind me, yanking a pair of shears from the desk and aiming the blade at him. "Get the hell out. *Now*. There will be no wedding. I'm not marrying you."

My breathing is unsteady. "I'd wish you the best, but I'd be lying. I think I've dodged a bullet."

He hid it so well. A predator in plain sight.

It feels as if I've unveiled a stalker. This man has been in my life for two years. Dinners at my home, taking me out, always with a thin veil of bland politeness that was hiding... this.

His gaze flickers between my face and the blade. "I didn't know you had so much fire in you. I'm suddenly finding myself much more invested in our relationship."

"Get out!" I *scream* the words, hoping someone might hear.

But Philip only laughs, mocking and low as he turns to the door. "I'll be in touch. And you'll behave in the presence of my mother in future, or I will make you regret it. Understand?"

He pauses, glancing over his shoulder. My arm is shaking as I keep the shears up, my lip throbbing.

Get him out. Lock the door. "Yes."

"Good," he says smoothly, tugging his coat back into place. "I'm glad we understand each other. I'll pick you up for dinner on Sunday. Be ready for one, and dress accordingly."

"Oh." He turns, tossing something at me. The small box hits my chest and slides down to the floor. "You'll wear this, or I'll break your finger to hold it in place. Put it on now."

It doesn't matter. Play along. Get him out.

My hands shake too badly for me to put it on the first time. The ring slides down my finger, the weight feeling like a shackle. "There. Now leave."

"See?" Philip smirks. "All it takes is a little firm handling. Goodbye, Briar."

I stare at the door for several long moments before scrambling to lock it. Jenson was right about my safety.

But I never expected the threat to come from Philip.

It's all too much. Last night. Now this?

The back of my throat begins to burn as I retreat to my armchair and try to breathe, the ring heavy on my finger. I still feel too exposed, as if he's going to walk back in at any moment.

I glance at the door again. And then to my phone.

Scrambling for it, I press the first number on my list.

The tears start falling before it even begins to ring.

JENSON

The sounds of Briar's sobs are branded into my brain like my own personal fucking brand of torture as I throw the car door open and step out to look down the busy street.

I still have no idea what's happened. Only her broken words.

She asked me to come.

Ahead of me, the queue of traffic stretches out, the ridiculously small street not enough to cope with the truck that's trying to reverse around a fucking tight corner up ahead. Horns blast behind me as I slam the door.

"You can't leave that here!" The guy behind me winds down his window. "Hey!"

"Go around it. Tow it. I don't care." His shouting fades as I take off, my heartbeat thumping in time with the pounding of my shoes.

It takes a few minutes before I get to her store. The door rattles, refusing to open, and my heart climbs into my mouth as I bang my fist against it.

There's no answer.

I glare at the battered door. *I'm getting her a new one anyway.*

My first kick nearly splinters it through, the shitty materials no match for anyone with the slightest bit of strength. The aging wood wouldn't hold up to a fucking light breeze.

My second sends it flying open, the broken remains crashing against the wall as I stride inside. "Briar?"

There's no sign of her, her armchair and the chair behind her desk empty.

My heart turns over inside my chest.

And then I hear it.

A small noise. The bottom of my stomach falls in a swoop as I carefully make my way to her desk.

She's curled up in the corner, on the fucking *floor*. Her face is buried in her arms.

Her whole body is shaking. "Briar."

Another small, shaky noise that threatens to shatter my heart. "Briar. Look at me."

Rounding the desk, I drop down into a crouch, keeping my distance. She doesn't look up, and my panic threatens to explode.

"Jenson." Her small whisper fucking hurts.

"Yeah, it's me." My throat tightens. "Please, baby. I need you to look at me."

"I don't know what to do."

"We'll work it out. Whatever it is." My voice stays low. As gentle as I can make it. "You're scaring me. Please."

She sobs, the sound *broken* as she lifts her face.

I stare at her for a long moment. Too long. Her face crumples as she raises her arms, before she drops them. "I'm sorry – I just—,"

She sucks in a wobbly breath as I scoot forward. "I'm alright. I am."

My hands gently cradle either side of her face. She gapes at me.

But all of my attention is focused on her lip. Her bruised, swollen as fuck lip.

It looks like she's been *bitten*.

"Tell me who," I breathe. "Right now, Briar. Who did that?"

Her eyes shutter as she tries to drop her face, but I don't let go. I stroke my thumb against her cheek. "It's alright. You're safe. But I need to know who hurt you."

Because I'm going to hurt them. Rage focuses my senses to a razor-sharp edge, every part of them focused on the *teeth marks*

that are embedded in her golden skin. "Was it the same man?"

I will fucking go to war with the Hearts if they lied to us. If she's hurt because that *fuck* is still walking around—

The Diamonds might be low on numbers, but I will fucking *annihilate* every single one of them for letting this happen on their watch.

Briar's head shakes slightly beneath my touch. More tears spill.

She's shaking so badly. But she doesn't reach for me, her hands clenched tightly in her lap even as I hold her face in my hands.

It fucking breaks something inside me that Briar feels she can't ask for the comfort she so obviously needs. "Come here."

Another sob. "I know you can't—,"

I pull her forward without another word, into my arms as her hands lift and wrap around my neck. I can't stop my body from tensing. But I wrap my arms around her, holding her against me as she starts to cry in earnest, every broken noise sending my anger soaring higher. I stroke my hands down her back, over the back of her head, carefully cupping her as she buries her face in my neck. Her bruised lips brush my skin, and the pained noise she makes is the final straw.

"I need you to tell me who did this." My lips brush her ear. "They're never going to touch you again. Do you understand? *Never*, Briar."

I lift her, settling back against the wall and tugging her into my lap. She curls into me, her breathing still wet as her cheek presses, just about my heart. "It's a long story."

"I'm not going anywhere." *Ever*.

I'm not sure I'll ever let her out of my sight again. Between my nightmares last night over what could have happened, and now *this*

My mind is made up.

Her words spill out in short, halting sentences. Her father. Her childhood. Her fucking arranged engagement to the cunt that walked in here and *bit* her. And by the time she's finished, my whole body is vibrating with the effort not to put her down and launch something through her fucking window. Preferably her fiancé.

Only the way she clings to me stops me from doing exactly that. I force the rage down. "They have used you, and taken advantage of you, and tried to force you into something you don't want. You're not going back to that house."

Her breathing stutters. "What?"

"I'm going to ask you something." I stare straight ahead, my jaw tight. I don't want to see the expression on her face. "If you say no, I want you to know that it's going to happen anyway. I'm asking because it's the right thing to do, but it doesn't fucking matter, because the outcome will be the same."

She's staring up at me. And fucking hell. The way these two men – one of whom is her fucking *father* – have abused her trust, when she's so open, so gentle, so fucking *submissive*, makes me feel ill.

She's a fucking gift. And they're going to break her.

So I'm taking her.

I force myself to take a breath. It's entirely possible that I'm going to be just like them. But I won't lie to her. "You're moving in with us. To Ravenhall. You can have your own room. Your own space. We'll put no pressure on you. We can tear the fucking agreement up. But Briar—,"

I glance down, meeting her eyes. "I am not letting you go back into that house. I'm not walking away from you. Not today. Possibly not ever. So, I'm going to ask you. Do you want to stay with us?"

Her lips are parted. "If I say no—,"

"I will pick you up and carry you." My arms tighten. "Nobody will stop me, I promise you."

Someone has to intervene. She screams vulnerability from every fucking pore.

She's a *magnet* for trouble.

And she has the survival instincts of a panda. If someone told her there was a puppy in the back of a windowless van, she'd skip right in with a smile and a thank-you to the scary masked man.

I don't want her to change. So I'll be the villain for her.

Even now, there's no fucking fear in her emerald eyes. "I want to stay with you."

Braced for a battle, the air releases from my lungs. "Good. That's – that's good."

Even if she's just proved my fucking point.

Her gaze traces my face. Her hands are resting on my chest. "Do you want me to move?"

"No." I glance down, and my gaze snags on her left hand. "Take that off."

The ring is grotesque. It's a parody of what any male with a puffed-up sense of self-importance *thinks* a woman would want.

That fucker *bit* her.

I pluck it carefully from her fingers, not wanting it anywhere fucking near her. "Do you want me to make sure this gets back to him? You don't have to see him again. Ever."

"He deserves to lose it. But I don't want it." She nestles against my chest. "Will you take me back to Ravenhall?"

My heart thuds so loudly she can probably hear it.

"Yeah. Let's go home."

RIVER

I don't think either of us expected Jenson to stroll in through the front door with Briar curled up against his chest.

Her hands are resting on his chest. And he's *allowing* it.

What happened? Kai signs the question I can't say as we both stand.

Briar offers me a small, uncertain smile, and my focus zeroes in on her lip. Kai catches it at the same time.

Both of us still. She didn't have that last night.

Which means—

Kai moves first, gently lifting up her chin so he can get a closer look.

And my voice drops, the tone not one I've ever heard coming out of my mouth. "*What. The fuck. Happened.*"

Jenson hesitates, before he nudges past and sits on our battered leather couch with Briar still held against him. His eyes are like ice, but he holds her carefully. Gently. We both watch as he smooths her hair back. "Briar will be staying with us. Tell them."

She shifts, and he releases her enough that she can sit up on his lap. The story spills out, Briar glancing up at Jenson several times, bolstered by his nods.

Kai and I exchange glances, a look of mutual agreement passing between us. Jenson catches it, his lip tilting up where she can't see.

Philip Fitzherbert is a dead man walking.

"So," Briar says eventually. She looks at Jenson again. "Jenson offered me a place to stay. If that's... okay? I don't want to impose."

From the look on his face and the tight grip he still has on her, I doubt very much that's how the conversation went. But it doesn't matter. "You're not going back there."

We've been taking her back. *Leaving* her there.

Kai has the same nauseous look on his face. *You're staying.*

"Thank you." She glances down. "I know tonight is supposed to be our second night—,"

"No." I snap the word, and her head jerks in surprise. "Not after last night – and then today."

Not with her face all swollen. "Once you're healed, we'll discuss it."

Truthfully, I don't give a fuck about the agreement. I don't think any of us do. None of us are interested in short-term anymore.

I don't give a fuck about waiting, as long as we get to keep her. "What about your things?"

She almost bites down on her sore lip before she winces, and a fresh wave of rage rolls through me. "I need to go and get them. I'll speak to my father at the same time."

She doesn't seem excited at the prospect. "Why don't you let Kai and I pick them up for you?"

She shakes her head. "He won't like that."

I don't give a shit. "Will he let you go without an argument?"

Her hesitation is enough of an answer.

"Let us go," I say gently. "We'll tell him you're not coming back. You can confirm it with him over the phone. You don't need to face that today."

Or ever. I can see her wavering.

It's your choice. Kai glances at me. *If you want to do this, we'll take you.*

Either way, we'll be there. Her father sounds like an untrustworthy bastard.

"I don't want to see him," she admits finally, staring at the floor.
"Not yet. Maybe not for a while."

I try not to smile. "That's fine. We'll be in and out."
Mostly.

Gerald Everett, a portly, red-faced man in his late sixties, clearly isn't expecting us. His eyes bulge as the door opens. My foot stops him from slamming the door in our faces.

Rude.

"Good. You're here." I grip him by his starched white collar, pushing him back as Kai kicks the door closed. "Anybody else in the house, Gerald?"

The blood has drained from his face. "If you're here about the money, it's coming. I'll have it within a month."

"See," I murmur, "that's very interesting. Where exactly is this money coming from?"

His face purples under my grip as it tightens, pushing into his neck. "A new partner at my firm. And there's more. My daughter will be getting married – there's an arrangement. More coming—,"

This fucker.

Releasing him, I step back. His face clears, only for Kai to step in and lift him, slamming him against the door and holding him in mid-air. He squirms, the low moans of terror sounding more like he's experienced seven hours of waterboarding instead of a little roughness. I think he might have pissed himself.

"No." My mouth presses into a hard line as I fold my arms. "Your daughter will not be marrying Philip, I'm afraid. Not after he assaulted her this morning and gave her a swollen lip. Bit her like an animal."

The fucker doesn't even blink at the news. "She'll do as she's told. She's a good girl."

This is what Briar's grown up with. I don't say a word as Kai's fist slams into his stomach, and he chokes, wheezing with pain. "It's coming! I swear – please! I just need a little more time."

"You misunderstand me." I step closer. My finger digs into his cheek, twisting. "Briar isn't coming home tonight. As of today, this is no longer her home. She's not safe under your roof, you selfish fucking asshole. So we're taking her off your hands."

He pales. "You're not from the Clubs?"

Ah. So that's who he owes money to. Jenson will speak to Keenan.

Gerald's interest rate is about to see a sharp increase.

"Nope." I pop the 'p'. "We're the ones that will skin you alive if you do anything that makes Briar uncomfortable in the future. I'm sure she'd like you to remain above ground - but if you try to control her, gaslight her, manipulate her in any way - or put her anywhere near Philip fucking Fitzherbert, we'll come back. And we won't be quite as nice about it next time. As far as she's concerned, you will be the father she actually deserves."

At my nod, Kai releases him. He hits the floor with a satisfying thud.

Go and get her stuff.

Kai disappears as I crouch, flicking Gerald's forehead in time with my words. "I'm generally considered the more reasonable one, you know. You might want to think about that, when deciding your future actions. But Briar will not be part of your business arrangements. Nod, so I know you understand me."

He nods. A scent wafts from him, and I wrinkle my face in disgust. Definitely pissed himself.

What a vile little man.

I tilt my head. "Now, then. Tell me where I can find Philip Fitzherbert. And if I find out you've warned him about our visit, I'm going to be very disappointed in you, Gerald."

He chokes out an address.

As a reward, I pat him on the cheek.

Fairly hard.

More of a slap, really.

Oh, look at that. He's unconscious. "Good man."

But an asshole father.

BRIAR

I glance up at the banging that sounds from above my head. "I'm really not sure about this."

"It's for the whole street." River is lounging in my armchair, watching me trace out a pattern for a new dress idea. His hair is down today, gloriously tousled in a way that makes me want to run my hands through it, but I'm not quite brave enough to ask him. "We had to buy your entire block, since we're not allowed to give you anything. You're proving very expensive not to treat, Briar Rose. Worth every cent, though."

My head shoots up at that, and he grins at me. "It needed doing. Your landlord wasn't doing the work, so Jenson intervened."

Slowly turning, I take in the sight outside my window. Jenson is talking to Kai, his hands moving. He looks more relaxed than I've ever seen him as he points to the new signage above my store. His whole face is animated, still talking as he studies the plans in his hands. "He enjoys things like this."

Much more than how he spends the rest of his time.

"He does." River shuffles, a grimace crossing his face. "This is the weirdest chair ever. I genuinely can't feel my ass."

My laugh rings out. "You're the only one who's ever mentioned it."

He sighs, and I return to watching Kai. He raises his hand, and I drink in the strip of tanned skin that appears at the top of his jeans.

"You're blushing." River's murmur in my ear makes me jump. He slides his hands around my waist. "Feeling warm?"

I swallow as his lips brush my ear. "I want to go back to the agreement, River."

I'm ready.

The pause that I get in response makes me turn to face him. River's expression has blanked, his dark eyes scrunching together. "Are you not happy? Did we... is it too much? Us?"

Frowning, I reach up and smooth the crease away. Any excuse to touch him. To touch any of them, even though they haven't touched me in the two weeks I've been staying with them. "I don't understand what you mean."

His hands settle on my hips. "You want something temporary?"

Ice washes through my stomach. "Do you? I thought – maybe you weren't interested in me. You haven't mentioned it—,"

"Because you were *attacked*. Twice." River searches my face. "And then Jenson pretty much forced you to move into our house. Of course we weren't going to touch you. Not until you were ready."

"I am ready." I'm burning up with want for them. All of them. "So we can restart the agreement?"

He's so close. I give in to my urges and reach up, running my hands through his soft hair. River tilts his head to give me better access with a soft, appreciative groan. "I'm going to wear my hair like this more often."

He leans in, his lips almost brushing mine. "Briar. Baby. Let me be completely clear about this. *You don't need an agreement*. You just have to tell us. We're all in."

My head spins. "All – all of you?"

River nods. "All of us."

My hands clench in his hair. "You mean like... forever?"

Both of his hands find my cheeks. He's so gentle with me. "Yeah, baby. Forever. In case it wasn't obvious when Jenson essentially kidnapped you. He's not as good with his words as I am."

If River wasn't holding me, my legs would give way at his words. His lips press into mine, soft as first. And then his hand slides into my hair, gripping it and tipping my head back. "So tell me. What do *you* want?"

Something awfully close to a moan slips out. "I – I want—,"

He raises his eyebrows, ducking in to kiss me again. Hot, and hard, and fast. His tongue slips between my lips, teasing me before he stops again. "Words."

I slam my hand over his mouth before he can distract me again. "Tonight. I want the same set-up. The medication. The cameras. The laptop. And I want all three of you."

He licks my hand, tickling it before I yank it back with a laugh. His smile is hungry. "One at a time?"

Slowly, I shake my head. "All three of you."

River's eyes turn molten. "Well, then. Better go out and let the others know."

It feels as though my face catches on fire. "Really? Now?"

He nods, turning me and nudging me toward the door. "Go on."

I can feel his eyes on my back as I edge out. My new door is a pretty metallic bronze, solid as a rock and with a ridiculous number of locks attached to it. It fits well with the rest of the security measures Jenson insisted on. I sidle up to him, and his hand reaches for me without looking, wrapping around my back and drawing me closer.

Kai brushes his fingers down my cheek. *What's wrong?*

They're both looking at me. Steeling myself, I blurt it out. "Tonight. I want... the medication."

Silence. I peek up, and they're both staring at me. Jenson recovers first. "You're sure?"

He doesn't sound sure. "Unless you don't want to."

"There is nothing I don't want when it comes to you." He feels warm against my side as I look up. Steel-gray eyes trace my lips before they lift. "We'll discuss the details later."

We've progressed to small touches. Slow. Steady. Giving him a warning, so he can prepare himself.

I never want Jenson to look at me with fear in his eyes.

But he hasn't kissed me.

I poke my tongue into the side of my cheek. "Just so you know, I'm removing the *one at a time* rule. Actually... I'm removing all the rules."

I dart back into the store before I can see their reaction, peeping over my shoulder when I'm safely inside. Their gazes heat my skin. Kai is grinning as he runs his hand over his face, but Jenson doesn't move as I dart back to River's side.

He presses something into my hands. "This is for you. And I can't take it back, since everything is set up in your name."

The tablet is a sleek, metallic gray. It feels light in my hands as I turn it over. "River, this is... it's too much! The building, and *this*?"

His hands close over mine. "Jenson and Kai are fixing your building. But I've been holding onto this since the day we met."

Warmth floods my face. "You have?"

River nods, watching me. "I never wanted to be temporary, Briar. Not with you. If you need any proof, you have it in your hands."

My mouth falls open as his fingers press against the screen. "This is your email account. So you can email the woman you met at the gala. You should be able to do everything you need to do on this."

I don't know what to say. River inhales sharply as I loop my arms around his neck before pressing my lips to his.

I'm smiling, and so is he, even as he takes over.

I'm dazed when we break apart. River winks, before he picks up my new tablet.

Blinking, I blurt out the words in my head. "I think I might love you, River Huxley."

Wait—

He's not looking at me, but he's smiling, his dimple flashing as he presses another button. "I think I might love you too, Briar Rose, if that's how we're saying it."

I'll take it.

BRIAR

I respond to a pleading message from my father with a single, tired sentence.

I'm not ready to talk to you yet.

I'm not sure when I will be, truthfully. But definitely not tonight.

My skin lights up with a buzz of anticipation as I walk into the kitchen, my copy of the agreement gathered in my hand. It feels so different this time around.

They're all gathered around the kitchen table, and I pause. Something close to dread has my heart clenching. "What is it?"

River winks, and my heartbeat settles down.

We have some options for you. Kai stares at me with an intensity that makes my toes curl, a flash of heat flickering in my stomach.

Oh. "Have you been planning this?"

Jenson's mouth tugs up. "Have we been planning what we'd do, as soon as you were comfortable enough for us to do it? Yes."

I eye the two glasses in front of him with heightening curiosity. "What are those?"

He holds the first one up. "This is the same medication you took before, dissolved in water. You'll go to sleep, and wake up after around eight hours, completely unaware."

Slowly, I nod. "And the other?"

"This one." He picks it up, swishing the colorless fluid. "Is a little different. Since you missed out on the... *sensations*, last time, I asked Emily if she could work you up a new dose."

River's voice lowers. "You'd feel everything we want to do to you, Briar Rose. Every. Single. Thing."

There's a smirk on Kai's lips. *But you wouldn't be able to move.*

My lips part as they watch me. "Are you serious?"

Jenson folds his arms. "Deadly. You'll remember every aspect of tonight. But you won't be able to speak. To move your arms. Your legs. We would use you however we wanted, just like before. But you would feel everything. It's a type of temporary paralysis. It'll wear off faster, after a couple of hours. Maybe less, depending on how your body works through it. But plenty of time for us to play."

There's a rush of heat between my legs at his words.

"It's more intense," River says quietly. "You wouldn't be able to stop us mid-session, Briar. If there's something you don't like, we won't know. You won't be sleeping through it. You would be helpless. It might be something you find you don't enjoy."

I turn his words over in my head, seeing the possibility.

One more option. Kai smiles. *You don't take anything at all.*

To be a complete part of it, with them. To speak, and move, and beg. It's tempting. And if I wasn't staying, that's the one I would choose.

But I am staying. With them. Forever, according to River.

There are a lot of nights to come.

But my eyes keep returning to that second glass. "This feels like good timing."

"For what?" Jenson leans forward against the island. He's still wearing the checkered shirt and faded, torn jeans he wore today. A little more rugged, his hands bearing signs of the work he insisted on doing himself. There's still a flush in his cheeks from the cold air.

He makes my mouth water.

I pull out the agreement. "I was going to tear it up. To make a point that I trust you."

I trust them with my body. With every part of me.

"I like the agreement." The corner of Jenson's lip curls up. "Or the list, at least. We know exactly what you think you'll enjoy. As far as I'm concerned, everyone should have one. But I'll happily set the end date on fire. And the emergency contact information, since you're not leaving."

The darkness beneath his words makes me shiver. "I don't want to leave."

"Good. Think about it, Briar." River follows my eyes. "No rush. We don't even have to do this tonight—"

He cuts off as I stroll across the kitchen and pluck the second glass from the island.

The look of matching shock on their faces is something I wish I had a photograph of. I raise the glass up in a silent toast before turning, tossing my words over my shoulder.

"Don't be long. If we only have a few hours, I want to make the most of them."

I have one final question before I leave. One thought that's been rolling around in my head, teasing me. "There's another option you didn't offer me."

Jenson's voice is a rasp. "Name it."

Breathe. "You have my permission to surprise me. Pick a night. Swap out my drink at dinner. Use me however you want. And when I wake up in the morning... make sure I know *exactly* what you did to me."

The idea of not knowing it's coming, of them planning our night without me having any idea... it makes my whole body flush hot and cold. It could be any time, and I wouldn't know.

My pussy clenches at the thought of it.

I peek over my shoulder, redness flaring on my cheeks. But I'm grinning. "I hope you like the creature you created. I have quite a lot of ideas, actually."

This was all their idea, after all.

I'm just... running with it.

KAI

The silence in the kitchen stretches until long after a triumphant Briar waltzes out, the paralytic clutched in her hand.

Fuck. Me.

None of us can take our eyes off the door.

Eventually, River clears his throat. His face is flushed. "Well, that was... unexpected."

"She made her choice." Jenson is still watching the door. His hands are clenched tightly against the counter. "We gave her the options."

And she added one of her own. My mouth dries. *We're doing that at some point, yes?*

"Abso-fucking-lutely," River mutters.

I shift in place. *One hour, outside her room?*

Jenson coughs. "Thirty minutes."

The room is illuminated only by her lamp as we each slip inside.

Briar's not wearing anything this time, her golden skin illuminated where she lays on top of the covers.

And her breathing... it *hitches*. A slight stumble, off rhythm.

As if she can hear us, just as she's supposed to. But she can't move. Can't respond. The medication in her system has her trapped, until it releases it.

She can't do anything but take what we give her.

My cock immediately turns to stone.

What started as a way for us to explore our needs is turning into an activity that feels essential for my own fucking survival.

And knowing she chose to give herself to us this way makes it even fucking better.

Jenson's face is shadowed as he leans over her. "Can you make a sound, Briar?"

We wait. And the smallest sound filters out to us, as if she's straining her vocal cords.

"Good," Jenson says softly. He runs a finger down the golden column of her throat, circling her nipple. "Fucking perfect."

We don't talk as we shift out of our clothes. We've done all that already, planned out how we'd do this. But we never planned for her to feel it.

It adds a different type of tension to the air. An intensity that has me already palming my cock as I climb onto and press my lips to hers without hesitation. Pushing them open, I circle her neck gently with my hand as my tongue delves inside. My other hand pumps once. Twice, several times, until I'm heavy and aching.

Below us, Jenson pushes Briar's legs open, taking his time.

They agreed not to speak for this first part. Not to let her know what's coming, each touch a shock to her system. So the bedroom is silent as he buries his face between her legs, until the obscene, wet sounds of him fucking her with his tongue, running it up and around her clit fill the air.

I lean in, waiting. My lips curl up at the little noises I hear.

This could easily become a new favorite hobby of mine. A silent, begging Briar?

Sign me the fuck up.

And then I muffle them, as I fit my cock against her lips. Lifting her head, I push inside the perfect, warm haven of her mouth.

Finding a rhythm, I thrust, gradually working deeper until I'm fucking her throat and keeping a watch on her angelic face.

It feels as if a set of gates have unlocked inside my head. There are all sorts of things I want to do to this girl. I want to fucking worship her for the rest of my life.

An image of her drifting off to sleep, my cock gently resting in her mouth and her arms hugging my hips fills my mind, and I shudder. Adding that one to the list.

"Jesus." River's face is dark as he watches us both. His cock bobs in his hand as he takes control of her breasts, running his tongue over them, grazing them with his teeth. His touch turns a little rougher, plucking and pinching her tight little nipples. He smooths away the hurt. "What was the position on clamps?"

Jenson pulls his head back. "Small ones are perfectly acceptable. Aren't they, baby?"

"Good." I drag my cock free as River leans over. I wonder if Briar has checked her bedside drawers. If she's touched the variety of things we placed inside them, all of them designed around the list she told us no longer matters - but that we fully intend on using as our own personal Briar tasting menu.

"And a collar?" We all pause at the supple pink leather in his hands. River shifts, leaning down beside me to murmur into Briar's ear. "I'm going to put this pretty pink collar around your neck, Briar."

He drags the connecting chains over her body, over her breasts. "These connect to your stiff little nipples. I told you you'd feel everything, baby."

I have to grip my cock tightly to stop myself from fucking exploding there and then, as I take in the sight of the sleek collar around her neck that River buckles into place. He slips his finger beneath, making sure it's not too tight before he runs the chains through his fingers to the clamps at the end.

Handing one of the clamps to me, he takes the other. Jenson has stopped, one finger stroking over her pussy, soothing her silently as River and I each lean down. I lick over the stiff bud before gently attaching the clamp, adjusting it so it's just held in place.

This isn't about pain. This is about sensation, about making her feel as much of it as possible under our hands. Our control.

I glance at Jenson, watching the fingers he slowly pumps in and out of her. He grins at me, as there's something bright burning in his eyes that has me grinning too.

Fuck, but playing with Briar is *fun*.

I breathe heavily as he pulls his fingers free and slaps her exposed flesh. He speaks as if she can't hear him. "I think I have another clamp in there that can fit over her swollen clit. But we'll save it for another time. I want full access to her cunt tonight. She's enjoying herself, if the way my fingers are soaked is any indication."

"Excellent," River murmurs. He looks across her still body at me. We know what's coming next. "Seems like both of our cocks will slide right inside, Kai."

My lips part, and I almost—

River freezes, staring at me. Slowly, I shake my head. *You know I can't.*

I tried for *years*, working with Emily to test my speech in different situations. Even with Jenson and River alone, I've never been able to voice the words inside my head. Emily has always insisted that I might find the ability, in the right situation.

And for the first time in a long time, I wish I could.

I want her to hear me.

BRIAR

Holy shit.

I can't see. Can't speak. I can't *move*.

But I'm freefalling into a sensory overload. Because I can feel... everything.

There's a building, pushing, tingling filling my lower body as Jenson fucks me with his hand. When he slaps me, the sound ringing out, something flickers inside me in response, an internal response to external stimuli that I didn't expect at all. Tiny fireworks that don't *stop*.

Not being able to move, to try to ease the ache, feels like torture.

If I could scream, I would. But all of it is locked inside, my body still and silent, and it makes this so much more *intense*.

The collar around my neck – the clamps around my nipples, Jenson's fingers inside me – it feels as if I'm going to shatter any moment.

But only on the inside.

And the way they're talking, as if I can't hear them, has me melting. "You should feel the way she fluttered against my tongue. All her muscles clenching."

The second slap Jenson delivers to my pussy isn't hard, but the sound still echoes as the flutters spike in a brutal wave.

"We're going to use your pussy now, Briar. Stretch it out on our cocks."

They haven't even been inside me yet.

And then there are hands beneath me, gentle and coaxing. Lifting me, and pulling my legs apart. I'm settled carefully against a warm chest, large hands wrapping around my back and stroking down my spine.

And between my legs, something hard nudges.

Kai. This is Kai, my knees spread on either side of his hips as I sprawl over him and he holds me in place. His hand tangles in my hair, stroking it back as he adjusts me so my cheek is pressed against his heart, listening to the beat.

It's a stretch. Almost a slight burn, but it feels so good as Kai carefully pushes inside me that the small noise sounds from my throat again, my cords aching.

I can't do anything but *take* his cock. Kai can do what he wants. Fuck me hard, or slow. And that suddenly feels like a whole new form of torture.

Because I want more.

It's like he hears me for a minute or two. When he's fully inside, my body pressed against his, he pulls out and thrusts in again, my body rocking against him as he uses his feet to balance. His hands slide down to grip my hips, and my head bounces against his chest from the movement.

And then he slows. I could cry, that building wave inside me subsiding as the head of his cock prods at me. He pushes in again, just slightly.

And there's something else. Something else long, and hard. A second pair of hands on my hips, as Kai returns his touch to my back, petting me again.

A hand connects with my ass, the slap ringing out. And another, on the other side, before fingers run across my skin. "Feels a little bit like you're our own little slave, Briar."

River. And his words – fuck. *Fuck*. His voice is darker than I've heard it, low and almost threatening.

It does something to me. My body is on fire.

And not just because of his words. Because he's pushing in, he and Kai together, and it stretches and burns and I can't *move*—

Lips press to my back as he leans over me, until I'm pressed between them both. "Such a pretty little slave. How does it feel to have three masters, Briar? To know we're using your cunt exactly as we want?"

They're moving. Not thrusting, but I feel so full that I'm glad. They're going to break me. I can't – *I can't*.

"You love this." A hand beneath my chin. Pushing my hair back, as Jenson's words brush my face. "Love being used by us."

Yes.

A low groan from beneath me. River swears. "She's gripping us so tightly."

The clamps attached to my nipples push against Kai's chest.

I'm drowning in my own desire, and I can't do a thing about it.

Something cool and slick presses above where River is gently thrusting inside me. Panic floods me for a moment as they both slow to a stop, their cocks heavy and full inside me. That's not my pussy. It's tighter, as a finger presses against it. River's hands spread my cheeks wide.

They're not going to hurt me.

"That's right." Jenson whispers the words as if I've spoken aloud. "We're taking care of you. And you can take a little more."

Something cool and metallic pushes slowly into my mouth, heavy with a strange shape. Jenson pushes it in and out, before it disappears. "I want to fuck your tight little ass, Briar. But we need to get you ready first. So you're going to take a little toy. Just a small one. River is going to plug your ass, and when they're finished with you, we're going to stand there for a while and watch you plugged for us."

Oh, god.

I ticked that box.

Why did I tick so many boxes?

"And then," he murmurs. His fingers stroke my cheek. "I'm going to take my turn with your pussy. You're going to bounce on my cock, that beautiful hair wrapped around my fist and a sweet little plug in

your ass. I'm going to fill you and leave you with your legs spread, my cum dripping out of you. Just like I promised."

Oh – *oh*—

River makes a strangled noise as Kai's arms tighten. "I think – fucking hell. I think she's *coming*. Briar, baby, you're choking our cocks."

I can't control it. Have no way of moving, or stopping, as muscles I never knew existed grip tightly over and over again, fluttering as the fireworks in my body explode in unison.

I didn't know it could be like this. Didn't know *anything*.

Because it goes on. Not stopping, even as groans ring out. Kai's hold tightens as more warmth floods me. And still, my muscles are moving, without any input from me.

"Good girl." Jenson doesn't stop touching me. "Let it all go, baby."

"*Shit, yes.*" River pulls my ass into him. I can feel liquid, hot and wet as it drips between us, overflowing my stuffed pussy. "You have me on my fucking knees for you, Briar Rose. Never want to live without this."

I don't think I'd have the words for this, even if I could speak. Kai taps my back, as if in agreement. He traces something on my skin. Once. Twice, as if making sure I know what it is.

A heart.

And I feel... wait.

My toes wiggle. Just barely.

I can *move*.

River pulls out first, Kai carefully following him. Everything below my waist feels soaked.

Hands stroke my skin as I'm turned. "We're taking these off you. You'll be too sensitive to keep them on."

Even as Jenson murmur the words, I can feel it. Almost pain, as if my body has reached the very edge of pleasure and can't take any more.

The clamps. The collar. Everything is gently removed, hands stroking me as a warmth appears between my legs. "Just cleaning you up. We've got you."

Kisses on my forehead. I feel warm, and lazy, and loved as each of them work on me. Even as my fingers begin to tremble, curling slightly.

JENSON

Tossing the clamps down, I return to my careful assessment. Briar's nipples are enlarged, faint marks around her delicate neck from the edges of the buckle. River is murmuring to her as he cleans her up, Kai returning with another cloth and the cooling gel.

"You did so well," I breathe. She was so perfect, so helpless.

This is an obsession I can get behind. Having her like this. As if the vulnerability of her that scares the fuck out of me outside the bedroom is one of my favorite things inside it.

Her face is turned to the side, and I lay beside her, our faces close together. Her lips so close to mine. Pink, and plump, and tempting.

And they feel so soft beneath mine.

My hand lifts to cradle her chin as my eyes close and I taste her for the first time.

How did I live without this?

It's her. All of it is her.

I haven't voluntarily kissed a woman in fifteen years, and I know that I'll never touch another.

I suck gently on her lower lip, moving to the upper, my tongue nudging inside. Long, delicate kisses as I adjust to the feel of Briar's mouth on mine.

My eyes are closed when I pull back. My whisper is shaky. "You're it for me. I adore you in every way, Briar Rose. I'm going to show you every day for the rest of our lives."

I'll never let her leave. The knowledge rolls through me, but it doesn't cause the panic that it might have, once. I watch her closed eyes.

There's a warmth in my chest, spreading.

She makes me *happy*. I intend to make sure she always feels the same.

She was made for us. A cool, soft balm for our broken, jagged parts.

I kiss her again, relishing the feel of my words against her lips. "I love you."

I feel, more than see, her lips turning up.

Her emerald eyes are open and soft, and my lips meet hers again. "There you are."

BRIAR

He loves me.
He kissed me.

He *loves* me.

All three of these dark, beautiful men love me. And my heart feels too full.

Jenson doesn't rush. He explores my mouth with careful reverence as my movement returns, until I can roll into him, burrowing my head into his chest. He strokes my hair. "How do you feel?"

I'm trembling. The aftermath of all those feelings is hitting me *hard*.

More hands. River presses himself against my back. "It's okay. It's going to feel intense for a little while, baby."

Kai runs his hands through my hair as he lays a blanket over the three of us. River presses in closer, murmuring to Jenson. "Sub-drop?"

My body tremors get worse. "What's...that?"

I try to press in closer to both of them as Jenson strokes my hair. "It's like... an emotional hangover, after what we just did. It's why we had such a large aftercare section in the agreement. It wouldn't have been as bad if we did things the original way. I should have warned you it would feel more intense."

Kai tugs the blanket down slightly. There's a glass of water in his hand, and River presses his lips to my shoulder. "You need to drink, baby."

I shake my head, not wanting to move. "Stay here."

More coaxing kisses. "How about this? You can curl up on Kai's lap, and we'll get you what you need. Okay?"

I pause, considering. Kai holds out his arms in silent invite, and I nod, reaching for him.

He lifts me carefully, the shock of cool air against my skin smothered by the blanket River quickly wraps around me. Kai settles back against the headboard with me held tightly against him, and River and Jenson sit close to us.

River holds the glass to my mouth. My arms are wrapped around Kai. "This will make you feel better. A couple of these, okay?"

He's nudging my head back, until the water runs down my throat and I swallow. "Why do I feel like this?"

Shaking, emotional... *needy*. Fragile, even.

"Your endorphins have dropped. Everyone reacts differently." Jenson picks through the fruit bowl on the dresser, returning with an orange that he starts to peel. "We'll work out what works best for you together, but it's completely normal. How long it lasts can vary."

He presses an orange segment to my lips. "Suck."

The tart, refreshing flesh feels nice.

"More? It will help."

I nod.

Kai rests his chin on top of my head.

Jenson feeds me pieces of orange, River encouraging me to drink another few glasses of water. And slowly, the shaking starts to subside.

I glance up at Kai, and he gives me a small smile. It grows when I lift my fingers and trace the heart he gave me back into his skin, following it up with a kiss. "I think I'm starting to feel better."

"Good, but stay with Kai for a little while longer." Jenson tilts his head at the torn expression on my face. "Tell us what you need."

My heart thumps as I glance between them. River starts when I crawl off Kai's lap and into his, wrapping my arms around his neck

and pressing my face to his skin as I breathe him in. His voice is soft. "Hey, you. Did you enjoy yourself?"

I nod into his neck. "I felt everything. It was... a lot."

"Too much?" His hand traces my spine as I turn my head, still leaning on him as I eye Jenson. "We can adjust things, if you want to do that again."

"I do." My smile starts slow. "I liked the clamps."

His laugh makes my smile grow as his body shakes beneath mine. "Me too."

Jenson looks a little uncertain as I move to him.

Pausing on my knees, I look at his face. His lips. "Can I...,"

I want to kiss him.

His hands settle on my waist immediately, lifting me until I can wrap my legs around his hips, balancing on my knees. "You need reassurance after a scene. Closeness. Good to know."

A scene. That word definitely works for what we just did.

My nose presses into Jenson's throat, before I shift, my lips against his skin. I move higher, kissing his neck. His cheek, just below his ear. Tracing across his face, his stubble rough beneath my mouth. "It's not the scene that's making me do this."

Maybe it is. But I just want *them*. And one thing in particular. Jenson inhales as I slowly place my lips against his. I don't move until he makes a noise beneath me, his hand wrapping around the back of my neck as he kisses me back.

"You didn't keep your promise." I breathe the words into his ear, and his body stiffens. He didn't touch me, my orgasm derailing his plans.

Jenson pulls back to look at me. He's still hard beneath me, but his jaw is tight as he shakes his head. "Too soon. We have plenty of time."

I rock my hips, experimenting with the feel of him. Velvet and heat, and he tips his head back with an exhale.

"Please." I press my lips to his throat again, licking the salt from it. "Please, Jenson."

I want to feel him. To know how he feels inside me. It's like something is missing from the experience I just had with Kai and

River, and I don't want to feel like that.

His words are strangled. "You are dangerous. You need to rest, baby."

Shaking my head in silent rebuttal, I glance behind me. Jenson's hands clench on my skin as I tilt back. Shuffling until my back is against the bed.

Kai looks down at me, his lips parted.

I run my hands over my body, cupping my breasts, feeling the ache of the past hour in my body. But that almost familiar buzz of excitement is there too as I peek up at Jenson. His jaw is clenched.

"Briar."

"Jenson."

My cheeks flush red, but I open my legs anyway. Baring myself to him. "Please?"

The noise he lets out tells me that I'm in trouble. "You're going to get exactly what you asked for."

He means it as a warning.

But my eyes widen with delight. "Promise?"

JENSON

Briar Rose is going to break me.

She's a fucking vision. Spread, and glistening, and begging, with her pussy teasing me.

"If you don't," River mutters. He's cupping his cock, massaging it. "I'm willing to take one for the team."

Kai nods weakly.

But my veins are burning. She's offering herself to me.

Mine.

"This is going to be fast, and hard. Understand?"

She needs to sleep. I intend to fuck her into dreamland.

Lips parted, she nods.

And I let the leash on whatever semblance of control I've been trying to maintain *snap*.

KAI

Jenson lunges for her.

Briar squeals as he grabs her ankles and pulls, tugging her down the bed before he lifts her legs up.

Sliding his hands over her skin, he pushes until Briar is folded, her knees up against her stomach. "Hold her hands."

It's a snarl. Leaning forward, I grab her wrists and pull, stretching her out. She moans, and all three of us inhale.

And then Jenson *spits* on her exposed pussy. "Should we shave your pretty curls off?"

River smirks. His hands are wrapped around his cock, tugging on it as he watches. "I already have a momento. But I'll happily take another."

Jenson hums. Holding her ankles so she can't move, he lowers himself until he can press inside her. Briar cries out as he pushes inside in one deep thrust.

He leans forward until their lips are almost touching, bending her body. "Scream for me."

I keep a watch on Briar as he buries himself inside her. He moves from thrusts to a twist of his hips, her body moving with his as he fucks her with rapid, deep movements. Her little cries stutter with each thrust.

Dragging her legs forward, he presses them over his shoulders, slamming into her. The wet, slapping noises fill the room with his grunts.

"Can you feel me, buried inside this sweet cunt?" He slows, his hips flexing. "*Look at me, Briar. Now.*"

Her chest is slicked with sweat, her eyes unfocused. Her back arches. "Jenson..."

He only slows for long enough to hear her moan, and then he's slamming into her, and her back is arching. "That's it, baby. Scream for me. Let me know how it feels to have your cunt used by all three of us tonight. And we're going to pin you down every fucking night for the rest of our lives. Fill you, use you, fuck you. Because you're *ours*. You belong to us. Maybe I'll tie you to this bed with your legs spread and we'll leave you here all day, leave you waiting until we're ready to fuck you. Your cunt needy and wanting until we let you come, because we fucking own you. Just like you own us. Demanding that I fuck you when you need rest. How the fuck do I say no to you?"

He slams into her. Her lips part, the cry echoing. "I... I... *ah!*"

Jenson shouts, bracing himself against the headboard where he's moved them up the bed with his thrusting as he spills into her, his chest heaving.

He doesn't pull out. He keeps her legs wide as he settles on top of her, checking her face. "Still with us?"

There's relief in his voice. She nods, barely. "Yes."

I press her hand to mine, kissing her fingers. River slaps Jenson on the ass. "Get off her, you animal."

Jenson pulls out. When Briar moves, he presses his hand on her stomach. "Oh, no. Keep your legs spread. Show me."

She's trembling as she spreads for him, letting him inspect her.

He yanks a pillow down and thrusts it under her hips. "Stay like that, until I tell you to close them."

Briar trembles, but her legs stay open as the three of us get up. We stand around the bed, watching her. Her pussy twitches, spilling out some of Jenson's release.

Luckiest men alive.

"Does it feel good when we watch you, Briar?" River is still fucking his hand. "Do you like the feel of our eyes on *our* pussy?"

She arches. "Yes."

River's breathing deepens. "Do you like the feel of Jenson's cum on you?"

She nods.

"Good." He steps forward. "Beg me to come on your pretty pussy, Briar. Maybe your pretty face, too."

Fucking. Hell.

She throws her head back against the bed. "Please, River!"

"Use your words." Jenson prowls forward. "Beg him, Briar."

"Please." She pulls her legs wider. "Please... finish on me."

"Where?"

"On my pussy." She almost sobs. "And my... and my face."

"Open your mouth." River's voice is a purr. "Don't waste any."

She opens her mouth wide, and he stands over her. His cum jets out, striking her cheek, hitting her lips, her mouth. And then he spins, hitting her pussy and covering the dark curls, already wet from Jenson's seed, with him.

He drops down beside her with a groan. "You're going to kill us, baby."

"I didn't say you could *move*." Jenson is almost smiling as Briar breathes heavily, her face shocked. "Did you get what you wanted?"

A frantic nod.

"Would you like to move now?"

Another nod.

"Good girl." He runs his hands over her lower legs. "You're done for tonight, baby. Time for rest."

River reaches over and gathers the parts of him splashed across her beautiful face. She sucks it from his fingers, watching him silently.

Jenson looks at me, and I shake my head. *I want the rest of the night.*

I want to take care of her. To run her a bath, wash her hair, and curl up behind her in bed.

Jenson frowns. *We need a bigger bed.*

One that we can all comfortably fit in.

Build one then.

His eyebrows fly up.

Spend more time doing the things you enjoy. You enjoy building things. Fixing things. Make us a bed, J.

Spinning, I turn for the bathroom. *I'll think of you when I'm washing her hair, by the way.*

His curse has me grinning.

JENSON

River and Kai lean against the wall beside me. The dance floor at Mystic is full, but our eyes are pinned on the girl currently dancing as if she's put her finger into an electric socket and switched it on.

That is... something.

Beside her, Briar is grinning, dancing her arms above her head as Dove nearly takes out a nearby tray of glasses with her enthusiastic leaping.

I'm not entirely sure that I approve of their growing friendship, but she makes her own choices.

"Are you sure about this?" River keeps his voice low. Next to him, Kai has a small smile on his face as Briar waves to him.

Dove waves back to Briar as if it was intended for her, and she tips her head back in a laugh before she makes her way through the crowd.

"It's time." I glance to him. "It won't change everything."

But enough. Enough for me to loosen the chains of my past that feel like a noose around my neck.

Laughing, Briar throws her arms around Kai. "Dance with me."

He doesn't dance. Ever. But he follows her without looking back.

When they get back, I take Briar's hand in mine. "Ready?"

"I'm looking forward to it."

I promised she could be here, but I still stiffen as we head into the back. The ring is empty, the room closed off, but the six people who turn to face us still make me want to check that my gun is still in its holster.

"Jenson." Alyss Lidell tips her head to the side. Curiosity sparks. "Who's this?"

Briar bounces past me. "Hi! I'm Briar."

Alyss glances at me before taking her outstretched hand. "Well, this is interesting. You're joining us for this meeting?"

I nod. Buck grins behind Alyss, but he snaps his mouth closed when I glare at him. "She is."

"Let's get on with it, then." Alyss settles back. "Why am I here, Jenson?"

I don't hesitate. "I'm dissolving the Diamonds. Splitting my territory between you and Keenan."

She blinks. Otherwise, she doesn't move. "Why?"

I resist the urge to look at the girl beside me. "My priorities have changed."

"I see." Her eyes slide between us anyway. "What conditions do you have?"

I slide the paperwork toward her. "I retain control over a small patch of land. Consider it neutral territory, but it's not to be used in any disputes."

One sleek eyebrow raises. "Anything else?"

I gesture. "River will retain control of Mystic. And I will also keep a small stretch of retail space. I already own the building. It's outlined in the document. Aside from that, all other assets are to be split."

"And your men?"

I hold her gaze. "I think you and I both know that the handful of men I have will not change this offer. But it's in there. You can have them, if you need the extra headcount to manage the new ground."

Alyss glances up at Chess in silent question before she reaches for the paperwork. "I'd be a fool to refuse. But I'll go through it first, send any questions over."

Nodding, I stand. River and Kai stand with me, Briar following our lead a moment later. "Keenan is doing the same."

Briar is almost vibrating beside me before she blurts out the words. "Would you like to stay for a drink with me?"

Alyss pauses, as if surprised. "I don't generally like clubs."

I already warned Briar. But her face still falls in disappointment.

Alyss's eye twitches. Just barely. "Five minutes."

My lips press together to hide my amusement. "She's hard to say no to, isn't she?"

The leader of the Hearts gives me a wry look. "You should use her in all of your negotiations."

It's the puppy-dog eyes.

Kai and Hatter follow as the two women disappear into the other room. I almost wish I was there for the moment Alyss meets Dove, but I have one more thing to do.

River follows me as I nod goodbye to the Hearts and slip back into the club. The stairs leading to the clubhouse creak under our feet, almost covering the moaning.

I step inside the room, glancing to River. "He's looking messy."

River doesn't hide his grin. "I was bored. He was annoying."

Sweat darkens Philip Fitzherbert's hair as he frantically rocks in the chair we kindly added for him. Stepping forward, I rip the dirty gag from his mouth and watch him retch.

"I'm sorry." He wheezes it as I crouch in front of him.

My head tilts. "Not quite so much of a challenge after all. I'm almost disappointed."

"Men like him never are," River mutters. Nodding in agreement, I straighten.

Philip's eyes bulge when I pull the ring from my pocket. "That's mine!"

"It is." I pull something else out. "You're having it back, don't worry. River?"

He screams at the sight of the long, thick needle. Screams, and sobs. But when I'm done, Briar's engagement ring, specially adapted, runs through Philip Fitzherbert's lower lip like an ungodly large piercing. Blood mixes with saliva as his head drops down.

Gripping his hair, I yank it back. "If I hear you've taken it out, you'll be back here. Understand? I'm going to be watching you. And if I hear you're approaching any other women, I'll be paying them a visit and explaining exactly what type of man you are."

Beside me, River's camera flashes. "For the memories."

I cut through the ropes. "Off you go."

He stumbles off as if he thinks he's actually getting away with it. His new piercing, laced with a pretty dose of poison, hangs from his lip as he glances back at us before nearly throwing himself down the stairs in his haste.

He'll have a week at max. And if he somehow survives, Kai gets to go hunting.

"A new leaf," River murmurs as we descend the stairs. My eyes catch on Briar, her hands laced with Alyss's as she shouts something in her ear. To her credit, Alyss only looks mildly uncomfortable. "This should be interesting."

"Yes." Smiling, I start to move through the crowd toward her. Kai is dancing beside them, surprisingly graceful as he slips behind Briar and sets his hands on her hips. He looks... happy. "I'm looking forward to it."

BRIAR

My cries fill the bedroom as Kai rolls his hips into me. My mouth drops down onto his as I move my hips, and he groans, his head tilting back as I run my fingers through my hair. My words are interspersed with gasps. "I'm going to be - late for - *work.*"

He shrugs, a glint in his eyes. But he picks up the pace until my muscles clench around him and my nails rake down his back.

When we're done, I slump against him, my forehead resting against his. "Love you."

His lips brush my ear. "Briar."

The murmur is deep. A little gruff.

And... *out loud.*

My whole body stiffens as I pull back. "What – what... did you just...?"

He's smiling, that small, sweet smile that he reserves for me. *I'm late for work too. My boss is an asshole.*

Jenson left an hour ago. Gaping, I stare at him as he effortlessly tips me off him and scrambles for his clothes. "Kai. You... you spoke."

I do have the ability. I just... prefer not to use it. Most of the time, I can't. The words won't come out.

"You said my name," I breathe.

I'm still staring when he pauses in front of me, dressed in the shirt he wears for the days he and Jenson plan on getting dirty with their renovation work.

He presses his lips to mine. "*Briar.*"

And then he signs. Heart soaring, I'm still signing when he slips from the bedroom we all share, leaving me in the bed that Jenson built for us.

At Ravenhall.

In this life I could never have predicted but wouldn't change. So much better than any fairytale.

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